CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FINAL: SHOWDOWN IN CARDIFF

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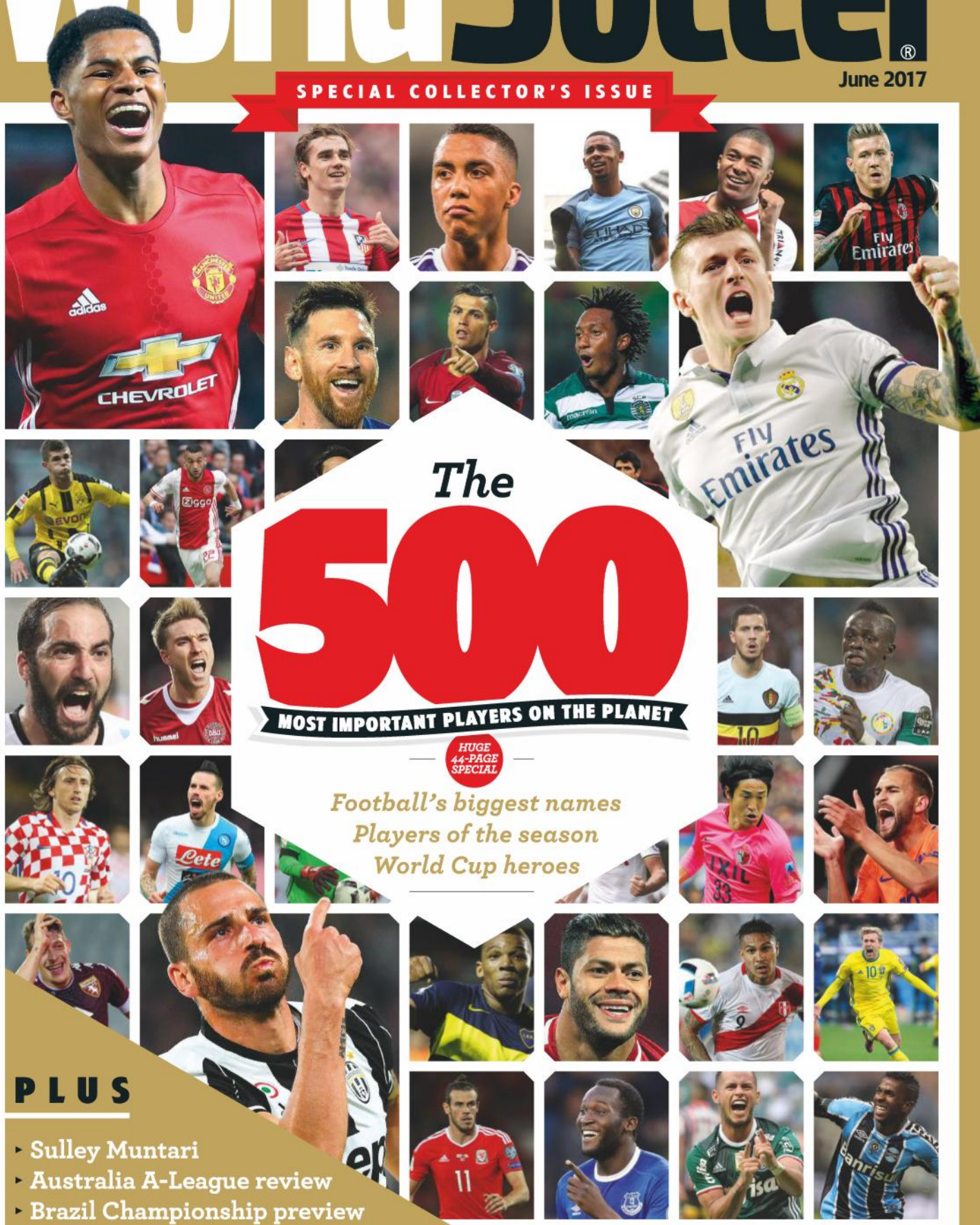

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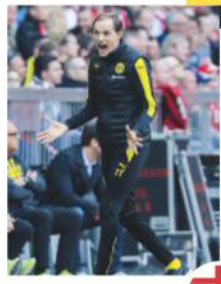

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In Pictures

The global game caught on camera

SPAIN...Cristiano Ronaldo enjoys the second goal of his hat-trick for Real Madrid against Atletico Madrid in the Champions League semi-final first leg

CHINA... Seoul goalkeeper Yoo Hyun tries to keep out Shanghai SIPG

SOUTH SUDAN...Wurube Robert is carried off the pitch by fans as they celebrate South Sudan's win against Somalia in an African Nations Championship qualifier

HOLLAND...Vitesse defender Arnold Kruiswijk sits down with a bleeding nose after colliding with an AZ player during the Dutch Cup Final

ITALY...Gianluigi Buffon of Juventus celebrates reaching the Champions League Final

TURKEY...Moussa Sow of Fenerbahce wins an aerial battle in the Istanbul derby against Galatasaray

RUSSIA...CSKA Moscow's Aaron Samuel Olanare (left) and Spartak Moscow's Serdar Tasci compete in a Russian Premier League game

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FROM THE EDITOR

The 2017 Champions League Final in Cardiff will feature two continental heavyweights in Real Madrid and Juventus. Both are worthy finalists, but there is a degree of sadness on my part that the exciting young Monaco side that featured in these pages a few months ago did not make it – and is now likely to be broken up, with the best players sold to the highest bidder.

As Jonathan Wilson notes in a new column (page 16), the Champions League is now the preserve of a select few, taking it in turns to share the title around.

> As Jonathan Wilson notes in a new column, the Champions League is now the preserve of a select few

A number of the Monaco players who beat Manchester City and Borussia Dortmund in this season's tournament before succumbing to Juventus feature in this year's World Soccer 500 (page 32). Their respective talents mean they are likely to be included in next year's list, though sadly not for Monaco.

Monaco's French league win – a remarkable success given PSG's wealth – will feature in our review of the European season next month, along with league round-ups from across the continent, and reports from Cardiff and the Europa League Final in Stockholm.

See you then.

Gavin Hamilton, Editor

10 SIGNIFICANT EVENTS THIS MONTH

1 Sheikh Ahmad quits FIFA p10
2 Juventus face Real Madrid in Champions League Final p28
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4 Holland appoint Advocaat for third time p23
5 Inter sack Pioli p23
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7 Sydney win A-League Grand Final p84
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10 Pachuca win CONCACAF Champions League p82

Headliner: Sheikh Ahmad

Kuwaiti steps down

FIFA powerbroker quits amid corruption claims

One of world sport's most powerful individuals, Sheikh Ahmad Al Fahad Al Sabah, quit football's top table after being drawn into the FIFAGate corruption scandal.

Sheikh Ahmad, a former head of oil cartel OPEC, is president of both the Association of National Olympic Committees and the Olympic Council of Asia. He is also head of cash-dispensing Olympic Solidarity and, in 2015, added to his power portfolio on being appointed a member of the FIFA Council.

The Kuwaiti, an influential supporter of IOC president Thomas Bach, withdrew his pursuit of FIFA Council re-election on the eve of the 2017 congress in Bahrain.

The spark under an explosive development in world sport politics was the evidence given in a Brooklyn court by Richard Lai, a member of the FIFA financial watchdog. Lai has admitted receiving around $1 million in bribes from sports sources in Qatar and Kuwait.

Sheikh Ahmad issued a statement "strongly" denying the allegations, but 24 hours later, amid speculation that he would become subject to a FIFA ethics investigation, he announced he was quitting all football activities with immediate

Evidence...Richard Lai told a court he received bribes from sources in Qatar and Kuwait

"I wanted them to continue their work. They were making a contribution to restoring integrity at FIFA"

FIFA's decision not to reappoint ethics chiefs Hans-Joachim Eckert and Cornel Borbely leaves German federation chief Reinhard Grindel downcast

Support...with IOC President, Thomas Bach

effect. He said: "With regard to illegal payments to Richard Lai, I can only refer to my previous statement and vigorously deny all wrongdoing.

"I intend to work with all relevant authorities to disprove these, for me, totally surprising allegations. However, I do not want these allegations to create divisions or distract attention from the upcoming AFC and FIFA Congresses.

"Therefore, after careful consideration, I have decided it is in the best interests of FIFA and the AFC for me to withdraw my candidacy for the FIFA Council and resign from my current football positions.

"I have been honoured to serve on the FIFA Council, FIFA Reform Committee and AFC for the last two years and I will continue to support the family of football once these allegations have been disproved."

How Sheikh Ahmad intends to disprove Lai's court-declared claims is not clear and this may, in the meantime, cast questions about his ongoing influence within Asian football.

The latest twist in the FIFAGate saga erupted in a Brooklyn court with Lai's admissions. A US citizen and president of the Guam Football Association, Lai is a former member of the Asian confederation executive committee and was a member of its marketing committee. He was provisionally suspended by the FIFA ethics committee and the AFC disciplinary committee.

The indictment against him named among his co-conspirators someone who was "at various times" a "high-ranking official of FIFA, the Kuwait FA, and the Olympic Council of Asia."

Such a description clearly fitted Sheikh Ahmad, who is confronting delicate enough issues within the Olympic movement. He is at odds with some members of the Kuwaiti ruling family over domestic sports governance issues while he and Bach and other IOC leaders are seeking a way to bend their own rules and make a double award later this year of the 2024 and 2028 Games to Paris and Los Angeles.

Lai told the US court that he had received more than $850,000 in bribes between 2009 and 2014 "from a faction of soccer officials in the AFC region".

An indictment statement from the US DoJ added: "Lai received those bribes in exchange for using his influence as a soccer official to advance the interests of the faction that bribed him, including by helping officials in that faction identify other officials in the AFC to whom they should offer bribes.

"The goal of this scheme was for the faction to gain control of the AFC and influence FIFA."

Lai said the money was disguised as payments to hire a coach for Guam but that the cash had been deposited in his personal account. He regularly asked for more money "for coaches," which came in the form of wire transfers. In court he added: "The term 'coach' was code for payment, for me personally. I never used those funds to pay for a coach for Guam... I kept it for myself and never told anyone."

Lai also admitted taking bribes amounting to $100,000 in 2011 from a candidate for the FIFA presidency in return for his support and vote as president of the Guam FA. This can only have been Qatari Mohamed bin Hammam, who was seeking, in vain, to oust Sepp Blatter as FIFA president in the spring of 2011.

Lai has pleaded guilty to two counts of wire-fraud conspiracy and one of failing to disclose foreign bank accounts and has agreed to pay $1.1 m in fines and forfeiture.

He is the second member of FIFA's audit and compliance committee facing conviction for corruption after Canover Watson, of the Cayman Islands, who was jailed for seven years there in February 2016.

Keir Radndege

Lai told the US court that he had received more than $850,000 in bribes between 2009 and 2014

• **The full story of the FIFA Congress will be covered in next month's *World Soccer***

"They know where I live. Let's see if they have the courage to come to me"

Torino coach Sinisa Mihajlovic accuses Juventus fans of directing racial abuse at him

Headliner: Thomas Tuchel

Is this the end of the road for TT?

Dortmund boss on his way out

Could Borussia Dortmund's German Cup Final showdown with Eintracht Frankfurt on May 27 be the swansong of coach Thomas Tuchel?

With Dortmund CEO Hans-Joachim Watzke recently admitting that his relationship with TT was strained, and several players briefing against him in the media, there now seems nowhere for the 43-year-old to go but the exit.

The simmering Tuchel-Watzke clash is, to all intents and purposes, a difference of opinion about the decision to rearrange Dortmund's Champions League quarter-final against Monaco just 24 hours after a bomb attack on the club's bus. A furious Tuchel later alleged neither he nor the players had been consulted, taking a particularly big swing at UEFA. Watzke, though, believes the diatribe was equally aimed at him and his fellow board members.

"It was too serious an issue for us to make that decision over the heads of everyone," declared Watzke in an interview with *Westdeutschen Allgemeinen Zeitung*. "In the discussions on the Wednesday morning [the day of the rescheduled match], I made it clear that every player who didn't feel in a position to play had until the afternoon to say so. The coach had the right to point that out too, but I was never confronted with such a scenario."

> One of the most innovative coaches in Europe...he also has a reputation for rubbing people up the wrong way

Incendiary stuff from Watzke, who was effectively calling his coach a liar.

Tuchel only has a year left on his current contract and, reading between the Watzke lines, a new deal looks problematic. As Watzke put it: "As always with negotiations, we will not only be talking about the sporting aspect but also strategy, communication and trust."

Coming to end of his second season at the club, Tuchel cuts an increasingly isolated figure. Dortmund president Reinhard Rauball was adamant the football department were kept fully in the loop during rescheduling talks, while the *Suddeutsche Zeitung* daily claimed that the coach is in conflict with a number of his players, that his gruff, authoritarian ways are creating a bad atmosphere.

Strained...Hans-Joachim Watzke (right) and Tuchel

One of the brightest, most innovative coaches in Europe, Tuchel has undeniably achieved at Dortmund, twice qualifying for the Champions League, on course to win the German Cup this term and generally enhancing their status as a top-10 European club.

But he also has a reputation for rubbing people up the wrong way; blunt, spiky and allergic both to empathy and other opinions.

Although a brilliant tactician, he can overdo the experimentation and, for some of his charges, a less complex approach would benefit everyone.

"It's not on to have so many changes of system in one game," an unidentified player told the *SZ*. "We can have two changes of formation before half-time."

Tuchel's agent Olaf Meinking insists that his client wants to stay on. Sadly, it may be too late for that.

Nick Bidwell

Going...Tuchel has a year left on his contract

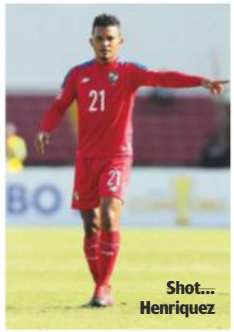
"And what are you going to do about the youngsters who grow up dreaming of wearing that shirt?"

With long-serving Roma midfielder Francesco Totti about to hang up his boots, coach Luciano Spalletti argues that the club should not retire their skipper's number 10 jersey

OBITUARIES

Moise BROU APANGA (1982-2017)
The 35-year-old collapsed during a training session with his Gabonese club FC 105 Libreville and died of a suspected heart attack. The central defender, who was born in Ivory Coast but was persuaded to become a Gabonese citizen by then national coach Alain Giresse, won 33 caps for his adopted country and played at the African Nations Cup in 2010 and 2012.

Amilcar HENRIQUEZ (1983-2017)
The Panama and Arabe Unido midfielder died in a drive-by shooting in his home city of Colon. A regular in the national side during qualification for the 2018 World Cup, he was part of the team that lifted the Centroamericana Cup in 2009 and won 75 caps in total.



Shot... Henriquez

Frantisek RAJTORAL (1986-2017)
The Czech Republic international committed suicide at the age of 31. The midfielder, who made 14 appearances for his homeland, won four Czech league titles in eight seasons with Viktoria Plzen before joining Gaziantepspor of Turkey at the start of this season.

Ugo EHIOGU (1972-2017)
The former England defender died after collapsing at Tottenham Hotspur's training ground, where he was the club's under-23s coach. Capped four times by his country, he won the League Cup three times: twice with Aston Villa and once with Middlesbrough.

Coach...Ugo Ehiogu was working at Tottenham Hotspur

HEROES & VILLAINS

OSCAR PEREZ

Scorer...Oscar Perez (left)

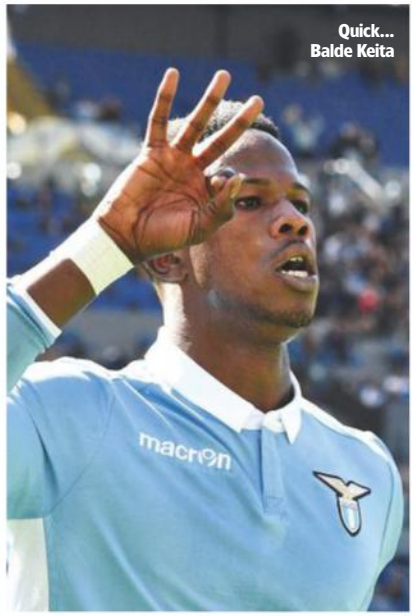
With just 48 seconds of the game remaining, Pachuca's 44-year-old goalkeeper, who stands just 5ft 7½in, raced up field and headed home the equaliser from a corner as his side drew 2-2 with Cruz Azul to extend their unbeaten home run to 34 games in all competitions.

CHAPECOENSE

The Brazilian club lifted their first title – the Santa Catarina state championship for the second straight year – since most of their team were killed in a plane crash last November. Top clubs from Brazil and Argentina offered to loan players to Chapecoense, who signed 25 new players this season and promoted nine from the youth team.

JAVIER MASCHERANO

Nine years after his last league goal at club level, when at Liverpool, the Argentinian scored his first goal for Barcelona, a penalty against Osasuna, in his 319th appearance for the club.



Quick... Balde Keita

BALDE KEITA

Scored Serie A's quickest hat-trick for 42 years when he netted three times in five minutes and 19 seconds for Lazio against Palermo.

ANTHONY AGOSTINI

Bastia's director was banned for four months following an altercation with Lyon goalkeeper Anthony Lopes when their Ligue 1 game was abandoned at half-time after several pitch invasions and crowd violence.

JOEY BARTON

The Burnley midfielder was banned for 18 months and fined £30,000 after admitting a charge in relating to betting on matches. The ban is likely to signal the end of his career at the age of 34.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Brawl...Palmeiras' Felipe Melo throws a punch

PENAROL AND PALMEIRAS

Players from both teams fought on the pitch following their Libertadores Cup match. Palmeiras won 3-2, after trailing 2-0, but at the end players and officials exchanged punches, among them Felipe Melo who was seen hitting Penarol substitute Matias Mier.

ELVIS MANU

On loan from English club Brighton & Hove Albion, the Ghanaian had his contract with Go Ahead Eagles in Holland terminated early for "unprofessional conduct" after he posted his support for former club Feyenoord in the title race on social media – on the same day his club were playing Ajax, who were contesting the title with the Rotterdammers. He played in a 4-0 defeat as Go Ahead Eagles were relegated to Holland's second division.

Conflict... Elvis Manu in action against Ajax

"The academies in Belgium are of a high quality and this club is part of the sporting heritage of Belgium"

Monaco's CEO, Vadim Vasilyev, explains the reasoning behind his club's takeover of Belgian second-tier side Cercle Bruges

GOALS we'd like to see again

1 MIGUEL GONZALEZ
OKC Energy v Sacramento Republic
An amazing "flip" throw-in from Michael Harris is headed on and Gonzalez scores with a bicycle kick in the United Soccer League.

2 SAM CLUCAS
Hull City v Watford
Following a corner, he controls the ball and then strikes a dipping volley beyond the goalkeeper from 27 yards.

3 GONZALO HIGUAIN
Juventus v Monaco
A flowing move from one end of the pitch to the other is sharply finished after a back-heel assist by Dani Alves.

4 ARTEM BESEDIN
Dynamo Kiev v Odessa
A fine chest trap is then followed by a thunderous volley from close range.

5 EMRE CAN
Liverpool v Watford
A superbly flighted pass by Lucas Leiva is met with a stunning bicycle kick.

6 EDIN DZEKO
Roma v Milan
The Bosnian centre-forward exchanges passes with Mohamed Salah before curling a right-footed shot inside the post.

WINNERS

VITESSE
Ended a 125-year wait for their first silverware when they beat AZ to win the Dutch Cup Final.

BARCELONA
By beating Botafogo, they became the first team from Ecuador to win a Libertadores Cup match in Brazil for 31 years.

CARLO ANCELOTTI
Bayern Munich's coach has now won four of the top five leagues in Europe, adding the German title to those of Italy (Milan), England (Chelsea) and France (Paris Saint-Germain).

LOSERS

TONY ADAMS
Lost all of his first five games in charge of Granada as the club were relegated from La Liga.

COVENTRY CITY
FA Cup winners in 1987, they will play in English football's fourth tier next season.

PEP GUARDIOLA
Now in charge of Manchester City, the ex Barcelona and Bayern boss will end a season without a trophy for the first time as a coach.

Jim HOLDEN

AT THE HEART OF THE GAME

English football pays a high price for tournament phobia

Another spring, another bout in the endless club versus country ding-dong that makes such a fool of English football.

Could England select their strongest possible squad for an Under-20 World Cup played in May and June? Could they heck.

Will England send all their finest young soccer talents, such as Marcus Rashford, to the European Under-21 Championship this summer? No prizes for guessing the answer.

And no prizes either for making the connection between that sorry truth and England's failure to win a major trophy since the 1966 World Cup played on home soil.

That catalogue of underachievement demeans one of world football's wealthiest and most powerful nations – and a major factor is the way England's national teams at every level and age group are swamped by the selfish demands of the club game.

Perhaps the most pertinent case this time is that of Rashford, the teenage Manchester United striker who is qualified by age for both the under-20 and under-21 tournaments.

England manager Gareth Southgate believes it would benefit Rashford – and the senior national side – if he were to play in the Euro Under-21s. He said so openly, although always speaking with diplomacy.

Manchester United boss Jose Mourinho has set his club firmly against selection, arguing that playing for the under-21s represents a demotion for Rashford because he has already won senior international caps.

It is a peculiarly English club view. Not so long ago, for example, Sergio Busquets was volunteering for a Euro Under-21 tournament when he had previously helped Spain win the World Cup. Four years ago Paul Pogba helped France to win the World Under-20 tournament when he was already a first-team star with his club Juventus.

> In every other country, a tournament summer would be considered a welcome addition to Rashford's football development

Rashford has not played a full season for United, so fatigue is not a credible reason to miss the under-21 tournament; and, in fact, he only become integral to his club side at the end of the season following a cruciate-knee-ligament injury to Zlatan Ibrahimovic.

In every other country, a tournament summer would be considered a welcome addition to Rashford's football development. And he is not the only English kid at the centre of such a tug of war.

Another at Manchester United is central defender Axel Tuanzebe, who was a regular for the under-20s in qualification for the world championship. He is perhaps a victim of unfortunate timing, with his club suffering a severe injury crisis among their defenders and the youngster being required for emergency first-team action as the Under-20 squad were flying out for their tournament in South Korea.

The same isn't true for rising Everton midfielder Tom Davies, who has played with rare panache as an 18-year-old in the Premier League. His club manager, Ronald Koeman, was insistent that he didn't feature in the summer tournament despite his obvious claims to selection.

Striker Patrick Roberts, playing at Celtic on loan from Manchester City, was omitted due to what the FA called "club commitments". That, effectively, was one match: the Scottish Cup Final. Was that really a good call for the future of English football?

England rarely send strong squads to these tournaments. They haven't won any of the 17 games they have played at successive World under-20 tournaments since 1997, never mind progress through to the group stage. And who scored the goal that delivered triumph that day against Mexico? It was a very young Michael Owen. And what did he do the next summer? Oh yes, he was scoring stupendous goals at the 1998 World Cup.

There are many people at Premier League clubs in England – and many people persuaded by them – who say that summer tournament football at age group levels like the under-20s and under-21s is a waste of time for players. They are plain wrong.

Germany were winners of the 2009 European Under-21 tournament with a team that included Manuel Neuer, Jerome Boateng, Benedikt Howedes, Mats Hummels and Mesut Ozil...all of whom also played in Germany's victorious side in the 2014 World Cup Final five years later. WS

Beneficial...Marcus Rashford in action for England against Norway in a European Under-21 qualifying game

Jonathan WILSON

TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

How good a coach is Zidane?

Real Madrid's performance in their Champions League semi-final first-leg win over Atletico was probably their best under Zinedine Zidane. It wasn't just that they won 3-0; it was that, after a slightly chaotic opening in which Atletico were far more open than usual, they controlled the game, rarely looking like conceding – which, given they had kept only one clean sheet in their previous 16 games, was somewhat unexpected.

That was Zidane's 81st game in charge of Real. They had scored in all of them and lost only six times. And yet, on the brink of a Champions League Final and level on points at the top of La Liga with a game in hand, Zidane's future was reportedly in doubt.

In any other era, that would seem ridiculous, yet many of the questions about Zidane are legitimate. In nine of the 16 games leading up to the Champions League semi-final, Madrid fell behind. That they lost only twice – three times if you count the Champions League quarter-final with Bayern Munich when they were 2-1 down after 90 minutes but won 4-2 in extra-time – says much for their character and self-belief, as well as their talent, but it also suggests they cannot control games.

When Manchester United won the treble in 1998-99, they made the comeback a trademark, but even Alex Ferguson was eventually forced to admit that the gung-ho attacking of that most remarkable of seasons was not sustainable in the long term.

Times, though, have changed. The big clubs are bigger now; the small clubs are smaller. That this is the seventh successive year that Real Madrid have been in the Champions League semi-finals feels less like a great achievement than how things ought to be. Real supporters may have celebrated their sustained excellence, but many have reacted with weariness and resignation: money has won out again.

Leader...Zinedine Zidane addresses his Real players

> Not being rich means that you cannot succeed, at least not in the Champions League

Of course just because you're rich doesn't necessarily mean you will succeed, something United have proved since Ferguson's departure. But not being rich means that you cannot succeed, at least not in the Champions League.

It's a remarkable sign of the times that when Juventus reached the Champions League Final in 2015 it could be regarded, not entirely unreasonably, as an underdog story. Monaco's progress this season has been heartening, but fresh young sides like that always carry a grim caveat: this was probably their one and only chance because by next season the super-clubs will have ravaged their squad and taken off half a dozen of their brightest talents.

Madrid may become the first team to retain the Champions League, and that would be a great achievement, but their progress so far has felt underwhelming. In part it's because last season's triumph felt like such a non-event, surely the least dramatic of all Madrid's 11 European Cups.

They plodded to success by beating an out-of-sorts Roma, Wolfsburg and a supine Manchester City before overcoming Atletico Madrid on penalties in the Final. The whole run was essentially about doing just enough against weaker opposition; perhaps they were the best side in Europe, but they never had to prove it.

This season, at least Madrid have been tested. But while they can't be begrudged their place in the Final after beating Napoli, Bayern and Atletico, there is no great sense of this as one of the best teams of all time. There's no great project here, no unique style. They're just rich, and so have been able to buy a lot of very good players.

It's not just them, of course. As their core of La Masia graduates dwindles, the same could equally be said of Barcelona. It could also be said of Bayern and Manchester United. Juventus are a partial exception, but even they essentially crushed domestic opposition by being rich enough to sign Gonzalo

Big signing...Juve's Gonzalo Higuain (in blue)

Higuain and Miralem Pjanic.

It may even be that the existence of the superclubs makes the football more thrilling, more watchable. This season's Champions League reached heights of drama and excitement, perhaps even technical quality, beyond anything in recent memory.

The tactical level is another matter, but the football has been undeniably thrilling. Or at least it has once we got to the knockouts. The group stages were a familiar procession. Fifteen of the 16 wealthiest teams made it through, with the one exception being Tottenham Hotspur.

The big habitually beat up the small. Monaco were a breath of fresh air, but otherwise it was all very familiar. Once, there was a sense of the European Cup as a quest. It was a long and difficult journey. If a side failed, there was no knowing when it would get another chance. Now though, it's like a game of pass-the-parcel at a rich kids' party; maybe the music won't stop for you this time, but it soon will.

The question is often asked of whether the Champions League is harder to win than the European Cup, but the answer depends very much who you are. For most sides, it's much harder, impossibly out of reach. But if you're one of the elite, inoculated against failure by your wealth, it's much easier. Turn up, hang around long enough, and eventually an easy draw or luck at a vital moment will deliver it – sometimes, as Chelsea found, when you least expect it.

Is Zidane a great coach? It's hard to know: all that can be said for sure is he's coach of a very rich team. WS

Beaten...Tottenham failed to go through

REPORTS WE COULDN'T MAKE UP

1 MASTER AT THE BERNABEU

US Masters golf champion Sergio Garcia was greeted by rapturous applause when he attended the *clasico* at the Bernabeu stadium, just a week after he triumphed in a sudden-death play-off at Augusta with England's Justin Rose. Garcia performed an honorary kick-off prior to the La Liga showdown, in which Barcelona beat Real Madrid thanks to Lionel Messi's injury-time strike.

Master...golfer Sergio Garcia

2 DERBY DAY RATS

A Danish Superliga derby between Brondby and Copenhagen was marred by disturbing scenes as fans threw dead rats from the stands onto the pitch.

With the home team Brondby trailing 1-0 in the 85th minute, supporters threw a couple of rodents at Copenhagen's Ludwig Augustinsson as he was setting the ball up to take a corner.

The left-back tried to kick the rats away before stewards arrived to pick up the animals.

Troels Bech, Brondby's sports director, condemned the supporters' behaviour, commenting: "We are obviously annoyed that we had to leave the field without points, but it is equally unfortunate that there are some visitors for today's match who could not figure out how to behave properly."

Pelted...Ludwig Augustinsson of Copenhagen

3 BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

Thirty years on, and Sport Recife have been officially declared 1987 champions of Brazil.

At the time, Brazil had competing leagues and the country's Supreme Court has now ruled that Sport and not Flamengo – who were part of a breakaway competition – should be deemed overall champions. The Brazilian federation originally wanted the two teams to meet in a play-off decider, but Flamengo refused.

The judges, however, were clearly unhappy that they had to make a ruling, with Justice Luis Roberto Barroso, who is a Flamengo fan, saying: "There is no place worse than the judicial system to discuss sports."

4 MESSI LOOKALIKE CAUSES CROWD CHAOS

Police were forced to take a Lionel Messi lookalike into custody in the Iranian city of Hamaden in a bid to disperse crowds who had gathered to have their photo taken with him.

Reza Parastesh, a 25-year-old student, posed with a Barcelona shirt after his father noticed a similarity to the Argentinian star. But matters got out of hand as word spread.

"Now people really see me as the 'Iranian' Messi and want me to mimic everything he does. When I show up somewhere, people are really shocked," said Parastesh.

Lookalike...the Iranian Messi

"We played like civil servants and have to do better"

Toulouse coach Pascal Dupraz endears himself to French bureaucrats after a home defeat in Ligue 1 to Caen.

Headliner: Sulley Muntari

Pescara midfielder walks off after abuse

Ghanaian takes a stand against racism

In a month when Juventus all but sealed the Italian title, the news was instead dominated by absurd scenes in Cagliari, where Pescara's experienced midfielder Sulley Muntari, faced with racist abuse, walked off the pitch, picked up two yellow cards and received a one-match ban for his actions.

Capped 84 times by Ghana, the 32-year-old had decided that enough was enough. At the end of the first half, fed up with the constant stream of "monkey noise" abuse aimed at him, he walked over to a family of Cagliari fans and gave his team shirt to a child who was with his mother and father, asking the child to stop his animal noises and telling him that to insult a black footballer in that manner was "really horrible".

Inevitably, Muntari's move did not have the desired effect. Rather than quell the racist abuse, his gesture only increased it and when he was once again the object of abuse towards the end of the game, he turned to referee Daniele Minelli and called on him to suspend the game.

For his pains, Muntari was given a yellow card for having talked to the spectators during a game. Annoyed with Minelli, the former Milan, Internazionale, Portsmouth and Sunderland player turned his attention to the fourth official on the touchline. When he got no satisfaction there, he simply walked off the pitch, earning himself a second yellow card and a sending-off.

> "If you don't suspend games like this, this sort of thing will continue to happen"

After the game Muntari explained: "When they started to shout at me from the terraces in the second half, I shouted "*bravi*, *bravi*" at them. The referee told me not to be addressing the spectators and that made me really mad.

"The referee is there to do everything, not just to blow his whistle on the pitch, but also to have the courage to suspend the game...I didn't touch him [the ref] because there are certain rules but otherwise I would have buried him.

"If you don't suspend games like this, this sort of thing will continue to happen."

Various players and Cagliari officials claimed they had heard no racist offence, while Cagliari vice-president Stefano Filucchi told reporters: "We didn't hear any racist chants and we are convinced that the Cagliari fans are not racist. We weren't informed of anything like this."

Muntari's automatic one-game ban was subsequently rescinded following a furious backlash after the Serie A disciplinary committee decided that no action would be taken against Cagliari over the incident. The committee described the chanting as deplorable but claimed that "an approximate number of only 10" individuals were involved, not enough to warrant a punishment against the club under Serie A rules.

Muntari was justifiably angered by the whole business. "I went through hell and was treated like a criminal," he told the BBC. "I went off the field because it wasn't right for me to be on the field while I have been racially abused.

"If I had this problem today, tomorrow or the next game I would go off again."

Racism in Italian football is often the expression of an intolerant and ugly minority. But you do wonder what examples fans are expected to follow.

After all, the current president of the Italian Football Federation (FIGC), Carlo Tavecchio, raised more than a few eyebrows three years ago when, during his election campaign, he outlined the need for stricter controls on non-EU players being bought into Italian football.

He said: "England checks out players when they arrive in the country, to see if they are professional enough to play. With us, however, 'Opti Poba', who yesterday was eating bananas, today is first choice at Lazio..."

Fans and politicians all stigmatised him as a racist, calling on him to withdraw his FIGC candidacy. Nicola Fratoianni of the left-wing party SEL tweeted: "Not a mistake. Just racism. Just ignorance. Just vulgarity. He cannot be president of anything. Clear off, Tavecchio."

Tavecchio, of course, went on to win his election and is still in charge of Italian football today.

Paddy Agnew

Appeal...Muntari pleads with fans

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

APRIL 2017

HOW IT WORKS Every month, journalists from each member of the European Sports Media group select their first XI based on the best individual performances from Europe's top competitions. For details of how each ESM member voted, visit worldsoccer.com/esm11

SEASON RANKINGS Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

Thibaut COURTOIS (Chelsea)	23
Gianluigi BUFFON (Juventus)	18
Jan OBLAK (Atletico Madrid)	13
Gianluigi DONNARUMMA (Milan)	9
David DE GEA (Manchester United)	7
Kasper SCHMEICHEL (Leicester City)	6
Samir HANDANOVIC (Internazionale)	3
Manuel NEUER (Bayern Munich)	3
Iker CASILLAS (Porto)	2
EDERSON (Benfica)	2
Keylor NAVAS (Real Madrid)	2
Marc-Andre TER STEGEN (Barcelona)	2
Diego ALVES (Valencia)	1
Willy CABALLERO (Manchester City)	1
Timo HORN (Cologne)	1
Brad JONES (Feyenoord)	1
Bernd LENO (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Simon MIGNOLET (Liverpool)	1
Rui PATRICIO (Sporting)	1
Yann SOMMER (Borussia Monchengladbach)	1
Maarten STEKELENBURG (Everton)	1
Danijel SUBASIC (Monaco)	1
Wojciech SZCZESNY (Roma)	1
Javi VARAS (Las Palmas)	1

DEFENDERS

Sergio RAMOS (Real Madrid)	29
MARCELO (Real Madrid)	25
David LUIZ (Chelsea)	22
Leonardo BONUCCI (Juventus)	16
Cesar AZPILICUETA (Chelsea)	13
Gerard PIQUE (Barcelona)	13
Giorgio CHIELLINI (Juventus)	12
Diego GODIN (Atletico Madrid)	12
Alex SANDRO (Juventus)	12
Mats HUMMELS (Bayern Munich)	11
Philipp LAHM (Bayern Munich)	11
Filipe LUIS (Atletico Madrid)	11
Djibril SIDIBE (Monaco)	10
Dani ALVES (Juventus)	9
Benjamin MENDY (Monaco)	9
Sergi ROBERTO (Barcelona)	9
Dani CARVAJAL (Real Madrid)	8
Rapahel VARANE (Real Madrid)	8
Marcos ALONSO (Chelsea)	7
Kamil GLIK (Monaco)	7
Laurent KOSCIELNY (Arsenal)	7
Victor MOSES (Chelsea)	6
Samuel UMTITI (Barcelona)	6
David ALABA (Bayern Munich)	5
Jordi ALBA (Barcelona)	5
Raphael GUERRERO (Borussia Dortmund)	5
Thomas MEUNIER (Paris Saint-Germain)	5
Nicolas OTAMENDI (Manchester City)	5
Stefan SAVIC (Atletico Madrid)	5
Toby ALDERWEIRELD (Tottenham Hotspur)	4
Hector BELLERIN (Arsenal)	4
Gary CAHILL (Chelsea)	4
Mattia CALDARA (Atalanta)	4
Sead KOLASINAC (Schalke)	4
James MILNER (Liverpool)	4
Daniele RUGANI (Juventus)	4
Antonio VALENCIA (Manchester United)	4
Kyle WALKER (Tottenham Hotspur)	4
Nathaniel CLYNE (Liverpool)	3
MARQUINHOS (Paris Saint-Germain)	3
MIRANDA (Internazionale)	3
Shkodran MUSTAFI (Arsenal)	3
Sokratis PAPASTATHOPOULOS (B D'mund)	3
Nicolas PAREJA (Sevilla)	3
Ricardo PEREIRA (Nice)	3
Federico FAZIO (Roma)	2
JUANFRAN (Atletico Madrid)	2
Kostas MANOLAS (Roma)	2
PEPE (Real Madrid)	2
Marcel SCHMELZER (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Thiago SILVA (Paris Saint-Germain)	2
Jan VERTONGHEN (Tottenham Hotspur)	2
Raul ALBIOL (Napoli)	1
Kwadwo ASAMOAH (Juventus)	1
Eric BAILLY (Manchester United)	1
Leighton BAINES (Everton)	1
Andrea BARZAGLI (Juventus)	1
Joao CANCELO (Valencia)	1
Seamus COLEMAN (Everton)	1
Danilo D'AMBROSIO (Internazionale)	1
DANILO (Real Madrid)	1
DANTE (Nice)	1
Stefan DE VRIJ (Lazio)	1
FELIPE (Porto)	1
Jonas HECTOR (Cologne)	1
Benedikt HOWEDES (Schalke)	1
Stefan ILSANKER (RB Leipzig)	1
Branislav IVANOVIC (Chelsea)	1
JEMERSON (Monaco)	1
Phil JONES (Manchester United)	1
Presnel KIMPEMBE (Paris Saint-Germain)	1
Dejan LOVREN (Liverpool)	1
MARIANO (Sevilla)	1
Inigo MARTINEZ (Real Sociedad)	1
Javi MARTINEZ (Bayern Munich)	1
Joel MATIP (Liverpool)	1
Gabriel MERCADO (Sevilla)	1
NACHO (Real Madrid)	1
Cesar NAVAS (Rostov)	1
Kyriakos PAPADOPOULOS (Hamburg)	1
Lukasz PISZCZEK (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Winston REID (West Ham United)	1
Marcel RISSE (Cologne)	1
Antonio RUDIGER (Roma)	1
Nelson SEMEDO (Benfica)	1
Kostas STAFYLIDIS (Augsburg)	1
Jesus VALLEJO (Eintracht Frankfurt)	1
Virgil VAN DIJK (Southampton)	1

MIDFIELDERS

THIAGO Alcantara (Bayern Munich)	24
N'Golo KANTE (Chelsea)	23
Eden HAZARD (Chelsea)	16
Dele ALLI (Tottenham Hotspur)	12
Philippe COUTINHO (Liverpool)	11
Kevin DE BRUYNE (Manchester City)	9
Emil FORSBERG (RB Leipzig)	9
Christian ERIKSEN (Tottenham Hotspur)	8
Bernardo SILVA (Monaco)	8
Yannick FERREIRA CARRASCO (At Madrid)	7
Joshua KIMMICH (Bayern Munich)	7
Luka MODRIC (Real Madrid)	7
Radja NAINGGOLAN (Roma)	7
CASEMIRO (Real Madrid)	6
FABINHO (Monaco)	6
Toni KROOS (Real Madrid)	6
Tiemoue BAKAYOKO (Monaco)	5
Angel DI MARIA (Paris Saint-Germain)	5
ISCO (Real Madrid)	5
Adam LALLANA (Liverpool)	5
Steven N'ZONZI (Sevilla)	5
Mesut OZIL (Arsenal)	5
SAUL Niguez (Atletico Madrid)	5
SON Heung-min (Tottenham Hotspur)	5
Sergio BUSQUETS (Barcelona)	4
Naby KEITA (RB Leipzig)	4
Miralem PJANIC (Juventus)	4
Arjen ROBBEN (Bayern Munich)	4
SUSO (Milan)	4
Marco VERRATTI (Paris Saint-Germain)	4
KOKE (Atletico Madrid)	3
Blaise MATUIDI (Paris Saint-Germain)	3
Ivan RAKITIC (Barcelona)	3
Paul POGBA (Manchester United)	3
Adrien RABIOT (Paris Saint-Germain)	3
ARDA Turan (Barcelona)	2
Julian DRAXLER (Paris Saint-Germain)	2
FERNANDINHO (Manchester City)	2
Ilkay GUNDOGAN (Manchester City)	2
Marek HAMSIK (Napoli)	2
JOAO MARIO (Internazionale)	2
Stevan JOVETIC (Sevilla)	2
Sami KHEDIRA (Juventus)	2
Mateo KOVACIC (Real Madrid)	2
Manuel LOCATELLI (Milan)	2
Henrikh MKHITARYAN (Manchester United)	2
Lars STINDL (Borussia Monchengladbach)	2
Arturo VIDAL (Bayern Munich)	2
Julian WEIGL (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Georginio WIJNALDUM (Liverpool)	2
Marc ALBRIGHTON (Leicester City)	1
Felipe ANDERSON (Lazio)	1
Karim EL AHMADI (Feyenoord)	1
Michael CARRICK (Manchester United)	1
DANILO (Porto)	1
Thomas DELANEY (Werder Bremen)	1
Mousa DEMBELE (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Cesc FABREGAS (Chelsea)	1
GABI (Atletico Madrid)	1
Jordan HENDERSON (Liverpool)	1
Vicente IBORRA (Sevilla)	1
Davy KLAASEN (Ajax)	1
Thomas LEMAR (Monaco)	1
Riyad MAHREZ (Leicester City)	1
Gelson MARTINS (Sporting)	1
PIZZI (Benfica)	1
Christian PULISIC (Borussia Dortmund)	1
RAFINHA (Barcelona)	1
Marco REUS (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Franck RIBERY (Bayern Munich)	1
Mohamed SALAH (Roma)	1
Leroy SANE (Manchester City)	1
Jean SERI (Nice)	1
Gylfi SIGURDSSON (Swansea City)	1
Corentin TOLISSO (Lyon)	1
Tonny VILHENA (Feyenoord)	1

FORWARDS

Lionel MESSI (Barcelona)	38
Kylian MBAPPE (Monaco)	24
Cristiano RONALDO (Real Madrid)	23
Edinson CAVANI (Paris Saint-Germain)	21
Zlatan IBRAHIMOVIC (Manchester United)	19
Edin DZEKO (Roma)	17
Robert LEWANDOWSKI (Bayern Munich)	15
Paulo DYBALA (Juventus)	13
Diego COSTA (Chelsea)	12
Dries MERTENS (Napoli)	12
Gonzalo HIGUAIN (Juventus)	11
NEYMAR (Barcelona)	11
Anthony MODESTE (Cologne)	10
Alexis SANCHEZ (Arsenal)	10
Radamel FALCAO (Monaco)	7
Antoine GRIEZMANN (Atletico Madrid)	6
Mauro ICARDI (Internazionale)	6
Luis SUAREZ (Barcelona)	6
Pierre-Emerick AUBAMEYANG (B Dort)	5
Arkadiusz MILIK (Napoli)	5
Sergio AGUERO (Manchester City)	4
Ousmane DEMBELE (Borussia Dortmund)	4
Bas DOST (Sporting)	3
Theo WALCOTT (Arsenal)	3
Timo WERNER (RB Leipzig)	3
Mario BALOTELLI (Nice)	2
Max KRUSE (Werder Bremen)	2
Olivier GIROUD (Arsenal)	2
Romelu LUKAKU (Everton)	2
PEDRO (Chelsea)	2
Andrea BELOTTI (Torino)	1
Karim BENZEMA (Real Madrid)	1
Jose CALLEJON (Napoli)	1
Douglas COSTA (Bayern Munich)	1
Valere GERMAIN (Monaco)	1
Mario GOMEZ (Wolfsburg)	1
Javier HERNANDEZ (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Ciro IMMOBILE (Lazio)	1
Alexandre LACAZETTE (Lyon)	1
Anthony MARTIAL (Manchester United)	1
Alvaro MORATA (Real Madrid)	1
Konstantinos MITROGLU (Benfica)	1
Ivan PERISIC (Internazionale)	1
Wayne ROONEY (Manchester United)	1
Raheem STERLING (Manchester City)	1
Jamie VARDY (Leicester City)	1

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

Blatter's book is his chance to reveal all

Sepp Blatter has written a book. Hopefully this will not resemble the clutter of one-off bits and pieces which were shuffled together as he trod legal water while under "suspension pending investigation."

That investigation, by the FIFA ethics chamber, resulted in a six-year ban from all football activities and his premature ejection from the presidential throne.

Blatter's fingerprints were wiped from the access system to his own office in September 2015, so he has had plenty of time to marshal his thoughts and memories, and set them down.

The autobiography might be a vacuous tome of airbrushed self-justification; it might be a cathartic settling of scores with his old enemies, just as former DFB president Theo Zwanziger did in his own book when he railed against Bayern Munich's Uli Hoeness and Karl-Heinz Rummenigge. Or it might deliver key insights into his climb up the FIFA ladder, and the battles and the people he had to fight as he rose from rung to rung.

> Blatter was carried away by the corruption of power, and ascending to the presidency in 1998 was absolute power

For instance, why did the young Blatter decide that a job with a small international sports federation was preferable to working his way up the layers at a long-established Swiss watchmaker Longines?

Did he consider he had made a mistake when he found out that general secretary Helmut Kaser not only did not want him but forced him to work out of an office in an Adidas subsidiary in France?

Blatter's initial role, as envisaged by newly crowned president Joao Havelange and his own mentor Horst Dassler, was as development officer. But at what stage did Blatter target Kaser's job – not to mention his daughter to be his wife?

The sub-plot is how Blatter earned the trust of Havelange, the autocratic new monarch whose culture and background were as distant from Blatter's upbringing as was Switzerland from Brazil. With hindsight, it is clear that Havelange's self-protective business style was more closely aligned with Swiss administrative secrecy than might have been apparent.

Clearly Blatter benefited hugely from being Havelange's loyal servant. Even as he rose to become general secretary he maintained his development-director status, which provided control of two important levers of increasing power.

Also, with Havelange flying in to Zurich only a handful of times every year, Blatter was lord of the manor. Approachable, social and multi-lingual, he was all things to all football people. To all European intents and purposes, Blatter was the go-to man, a senior executive who was also the face of FIFA as the expanding media grew more inquisitive about sport's interaction with business and politics.

But in the early 1990s Blatter's ambition was almost his undoing.

Did Blatter plan the attempted coup against Havelange? What responsibility did he have for the anti-Havelange leaks that were emanating from some of FIFA's senior staff? How did he manage to save his job, apart from agreeing to the sacking of media director Guido Tognoni? And was Blatter so "in the know" about the commissions/bribes falling to Havelange from marketing partner ISL that the boss dare sack his right-hand man?

Master and servant...Joao Havelange (right) with Blatter in 1997

Havelange was not breaking any Swiss law at that time in accepting monies from ISL, who wanted to keep FIFA's business – which meant keeping the president sweet.

When Mark McCormack's IMG offered FIFA far more money than ISL for the contract, Blatter must have known why Havelange insisted on keeping faith with the marketing outfit created for him by Dassler in 1982. Dassler died in 1987, but by then, very obviously, Havelange was already reaping the rewards, as was son-in-law Ricardo Teixeira.

Not only were Havelange and Teixeira in ISL's pay, so were Nicolas

Holding court... Sepp Blatter in April 2017

Leoz and Issa Hayatou, and probably many more ExCo members whose identities were hidden in legal code.

So how much did Blatter know? How early did he know? And how many years before the misdirected ISL cheque for Havelange crossed his desk? The key to his career is a tale of timing.

Blatter was carried away by the corruption of power, and ascending to the presidency was absolute power, but his achievements should be acknowledged.

His work in developing football around the world was tireless and outstanding, as was his managing the remarkable financial turnaround and his devotion to the game and to FIFA. Unfortunately all of this became inextricably entangled with his own eventual assumption of the divine right of FIFA presidents.

Nowhere was this latter loss of logic better evidenced than in his complaint that the ethics chamber had been created to judge others, not himself and, secondly, in his pursuit of a Nobel peace prize.

These days, Blatter's opinions lack power and relevance when fulminating about match fixing, doping and all the other sins which assail not only sport but every other pillar of daily life. One of his favourite ripostes involved railing against the "little devils of society" – only he failed to notice that they were already pulling him down.

Blatter's book should be judged against the above, and what did he know and when?

Anything else is mere sweet Swiss mountain air.

WARNER SAYS HE WILL SUE CONCACAF

Jack Warner continues to raise the occasional entertaining shaft of humour into his on-going campaign to avoid extradition from Trinidad & Tobago to the United States to answer fraud charges in the $200million FIFAGate case.

One of football's most influential powerbrokers while FIFA vice-president and head of the central/north American region, Warner is now 74. He left the game in 2011 after being suspended for conniving with Mohammed Bin Hammam in handing out envelopes full of cash to Caribbean FA delegates.

The subsequent life ban bequeathed by the FIFA ethics chamber was academic. Warner had long since retreated to concentrate

Threat...Jack Warner

on politics back home, while Bin Hammam had a ban overturned by the Court of Arbitration for Sport and was subsequently suspended for life on other issues.

Now Warner has announced that he intends to sue CONCACAF – who are already suing him and former general secretary Chuck Blazer for $20m – for $40m over "persistent defamation of my character".

The legal action, Warner said, would also be directed by name at Sunil Gulati, president of US Soccer.

Presumably, at some stage, Warner's action would have to come before a court in the United States, where CONCACAF and USSF are headquartered. But, since he is spending heavily on high-price QCs to keep him out of the US, it is impossible to imagine he intends to fly over to pursue his case.

This, of course, is the same Jack Warner who threatened a "tsunami" of revelations to bring down FIFA, Sepp Blatter and all the rest of the motley crew.

That was six years ago – and we are still waiting.

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"He let down Serbia, he let down Belgium and Sunderland too. I don't understand why such a big organisation as the KNVB [the Dutch federation] have brought him back"

The reappointment of Dick Advocaat as Holland coach sparks a hostile response from former Dutch playmaker Wim Van Hanegem (right)

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

Appointments, sackings and loans

IN

Challenge...Diego Maradona

EUROPE

Former England and Arsenal captain **TONY ADAMS**, who had been working at the club since November, was named coach of Granada until the end of the Spanish season.

HARRY REDKNAPP replaced Gianfranco Zola as boss of English second-tier side Birmingham City.

Juventus agreed a deal to sign Uruguayan playmaker **RODRIGO BENTANCUR** from Boca Juniors for an initial €9.5million. Valencia signed **SIMONE ZAZA** for €16m after exercising an option to make the Juve striker's loan permanent.

Paul Baccaglini may have bought Palermo from Maurizio Zamparini in March, but their habit of sacking coaches continued – the previous owner made more than 40 changes – as **DIEGO BORTOLUZZI** replaced Diego Lopez.

After four decades of service to Sevilla as everything from keeper to director of football, **MONCHI** joined Roma as sporting director.

ALEKSANDRS STARKOVS, who led his homeland to the finals of Euro 2004, returned to take charge of Latvia for a third time, replacing Marians Pahars.

GERARD LYTTLE resigned as manager of Northern Irish side Cliftonville to take charge of Sligo Rovers in the Republic of Ireland. **BARRY GRAY** replaced Lyttle.

CONCACAF

Former Chelsea and Ivory Coast striker **DIDIER DROGBA** joined United Soccer League side Phoenix Rising as a player and co-owner.

AFRICA

Sacked by Spanish side Granada, **LUCAS ALCARAZ** became Algeria's fourth coach in 13 months.

NABIL MAALOUL, who had six months in charge during the 2014 World Cup qualifiers, was named Tunisia coach for a second time.

South Africa re-appointed **STUART BAXTER** as coach.

ASIA

DIEGO MARADONA was appointed coach of UAE second-tier side Al Fujairah.

A month after parting company with Argentina, **EDGARDO BAUZA** was named UAE coach. **MILOVAN RAJEVAC** took charge of Thailand.

GREGORIO MANZANO returned to the CSL as boss of Guizhou Hengfeng Zhicheng.

Back...Dick Advocaat

Advocaat takes Holland job

DICK ADVOCAAT was appointed coach of Holland for a third time, with **RUUD GULLIT** as his assistant.

In his previous spells in charge, the 70-year-old – who leaves Fenerbahce at the end of the current Turkish season – led Holland to the 1994 World Cup quarter-finals and the semi-finals of Euro 2004.

Change...Diego Bortoluzzi

Gone...Stefano Pioli

Inter sack Pioli

Internazionale sacked coach **STEFANO PIOLI** after six months in charge following a run of seven games without a win. Pioli replaced Frank de Boer in November in what the Serie A club called a "difficult season".

Genoa parted company with **ANDREA MANDORLINI** after just six games in charge.

OUT

EUROPE

Valencia coach **VORO** will step down at the end of the season. Real Betis sacked coach **VICTOR SANCHEZ** after three consecutive defeats in La Liga.

CHRISTOPHE GALTIER will quit as Saint-Etienne coach at the end of the French season.

Standard Liege dismissed coach **ALEKSANDAR JANKOVIC** after they finished ninth in the regular phase of the Belgian season.

PAUL HARTLEY was dismissed by Scottish Premiership strugglers Dundee after seven straight defeats.

ASIA

RADHI SHENAISHIL's second spell as Iraq coach ended after five losses in seven World Cup qualifiers.

Newcastle Jets sacked **MARK JONES** after finishing bottom of the A-League, while Spanish coach **GUILLERMO AMOR** left Adelaide United.

Leaving...Voro

Brian GLANVILLE

THE VOICE OF FOOTBALL

Escape...Harry Redknapp led Birmingham City to safety

A Championship full of paradoxes

As the English season moved to its climax, there was a profusion of paradoxes. Not least at the bottom of the Championship. Managed by that supreme escapologist, on pitch or in court, Harry Redknapp, Birmingham City struggled clear of relegation at the expense of Blackburn Rovers.

Both clubs, like alas so many others, have been afflicted by erratic foreign ownership. One of these days I shall be able to make out what the criteria of the Football League are to establish owners as fit and proper persons. Not that the Premier League's record in such matters is wholly unblemished.

City and Harry escaped relegation in large measure because in their penultimate game, Huddersfield Town for no apparent reason put out a team with 10 changes. Limply, the chief executive of the Football League has asked for an explanation. Goodness knows what that could possibly be, since the club was already qualified for the play-offs and nothing that happened against Birmingham could alter that.

Birmingham duly played their last, vital league match, won at Bristol City and stayed up. If the League meant anything by their demand, it should surely have meant that they had it in their power to insist on a replay of the match between Birmingham and Huddersfield. Whether under current regulations they had the power to do that, ask me not.

As it is, Birmingham stay up and poor Blackburn go down, even after such a spirited and impressive victory at Brentford in their final game. And this despite the shambolic ownership of Venkys, much hated by the fans, who live mysteriously in distant India.

Down...a Blackburn Rovers supporter

As to the play-offs, Fulham look the likeliest to qualify. Given their talents and their salient record in the division – most shots (711) in the Championship, most possession (62.9 per cent), most accurate passes (83.9 per cent) – they should surely have finished higher and even won away to champions Newcastle United. But they blew hot and cold, a home game lost to Wolves and one against Brentford, drawn, keeping them down in sixth place.

On form, and ending their league campaign with victory away to the team which finished above them, Sheffield Wednesday, Fulham should have topped the division. They have an elegant, left-footed midfielder in skipper Tom Cairney, once a Blackburn player himself, and a remarkable left-sided prodigy in the 16-year-old Ryan Sessegnon.

But with Fulham, you simply never quite know.

Memories of Lennon

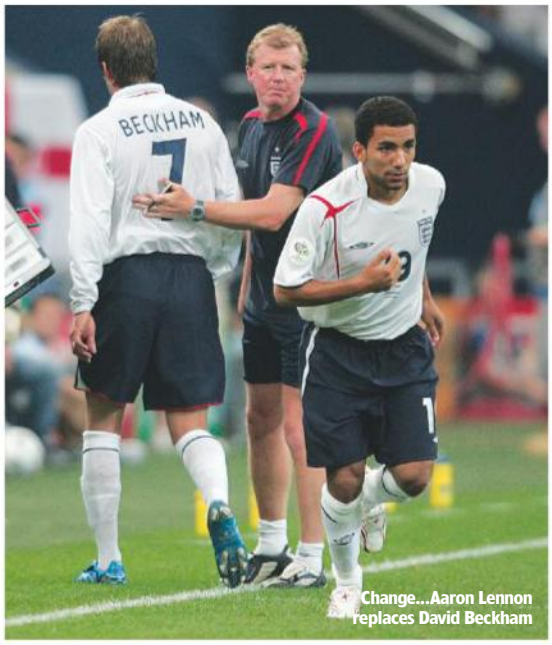
How very sad to see Everton's little left-winger Aaron Lennon sectioned as the result of an apparent nervous breakdown.

I remember his excellence in the 2006 World Cup when his elusive skills on the right flank, his ability to go in classic style to the byline then pull the ball back, put

> Lennon's elusive skills put David Beckham to shame

the preferred incumbent David Beckham to shame.

When Lennon rather than Beckham played there – and there was one match in which Beckham generously dropped to right-back – England always seemed capable of scoring.



Change...Aaron Lennon replaces David Beckham

Heading for controversy

There has been much explicable joy among the relatives of poor Jeff Astle, who so sadly died from brain damage clearly as a consequence of heading so many balls. But I still move to reiterate that an inquiry, however drawn out and expensive, will not tell us anything we so plainly know already.

That is to say that constant heading of the ball is a manifest source of brain damage; such as, alas, has been suffered by those 1966 World Cup-winners Martin Peters, Ray Wilson and Nobby Stiles.

It is equally obvious that constant heading of the ball is the cause of such damage to a number of players; though not to each and every one of them.

The logical corollary of which is to ban heading altogether – and can you ever imagine that being done?

Sharing...Arsenal play West Ham United at White Hart Lane

What happened to stadium sharing?

Both Chelsea and Tottenham Hotspur are about to rebuild their stadia; massively so in the case of Chelsea, who intend to work on the whole ground. Wembley would seem to be the destination for Spurs, although when they have played there in Europe this season it has largely been a disaster.

Chelsea would have liked to use Twickenham, potentially ideal, but they have been turned down.

It still baffles me that nothing has been worked out, even mooted, over the solution for Spurs to share with Arsenal. Why ever not; not least because they have done so before.

When the Second World War began in 1939, the Arsenal Studium at Highbury was taken over as an Air Raid Precautions site and not restored to the Gunners until the 1946-47 season. In the meantime, Arsenal shared White Hart Lane with Tottenham and continued to do so for seven years.

Ronaldo past and present

Is Cristiano Ronaldo really past his best? Such is the opinion of Graeme Souness, even after his hat-trick in the European Cup derby against Atletico.

One of those goals came from an astonishing leap to head the ball home,

> Is Cristiano Ronaldo really past his best?

a goal which a Dean, Lawton or Kocsis might have envied. Tired of waiting on the wing, like so many great wingers before him, Ronaldo functioned as a virtual centre-forward.

If his best was even better than that, what a best it must have been!

Astonishing...Cristiano Ronaldo heads home against Atletico

BBC's omission

Match of the Day's reports are, by and large, instructive and revealing. But recently it baffled me, unless for some reason I imagined it, that in the West Ham United v Tottenham Hotspur game, no mention was made of the appalling and dangerous early foul by Hammers' Mark Noble on Tottenham's Eric Dier.

It should surely have merited a red card, in which case the whole profile of the game would have changed and Spurs would surely have won. As it was, Noble went on to play a crucial part in his team's surprising victory.

Mourinho's gamble

It was not just Huddersfield in the Championship playing a weakened team, Jose Mourinho surely put one out for Manchester United in the Premier League against Arsenal.

With no Pogba, and no Rashford or Lingard till far too late in the game, it enabled Arsene Wenger at long, long last to beat Mourinho in a major competition.

Mourinho's eyes, as we know, were on the secondary European competition, in which victory would bring a place in the European Cup, which United had little chance of reaching via the league.

So even the neglected Wayne Rooney got a full game, though apart from one powerful and accurate drive, not a distinguished one.

Yet United came close enough at least for parity. Had Ander Herrera not turned his back on that long range shot from Granit Xhaka, thus diverting the ball past his own keeper, would Arsenal have gone on to win?

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KEEPERS

JACK'S BACK

After sustaining a fractured ankle whilst on England duty against Germany, the Stoke keeper has been sidelined for more than a year. Pro:Direct have followed Butland's rehab and recovery and it's great to see him ready and raring to go. Check out the exclusive video on our social channels and if you like the look of what Jack's wearing, it's all available right now online.

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"I don't need to take credit for anything. I do my job, I do it with enthusiasm and calm. I really enjoy coaching, that is what makes me relax"

Max Allegri reflects on his life as Juventus coach

2017 Champions League Final

Destination Cardiff

Cardiff's majestic National Stadium of Wales is the venue for the climax to the European club season as Real Madrid and Juventus go head to head in a re-run of the 1998 Champions League Final.

In 1998, Madrid won their seventh European Cup, ending a 31-year wait for another European title, with a Predrag Mijatovic goal settling a tense encounter at the Amsterdam Arena. Back then, Juventus, with the world's best player Zinedine Zidane at the heart of their midfield, were the continent's leading club, having won the title in 1996, the first of three successive Finals they reached in the late 1990s.

Since then, of course, Madrid have strengthened their record as Europe's most successful club, winning four further European crowns, including the 2002 Final thanks to Zidane's astonishing, gravity-defying volley against Bayer Leverkusen in Glasgow.

Now, having won their 11th title last year, beating city rivals Atletico on penalties in Milan, Madrid are bidding to become the first side to retain the European Cup since Milan in 1990.

They face a Juve side managed with panache by Maximiliano Allegri. The Italians have dominated their domestic league for the past six seasons but have not added to their European trophy haul since the win over Ajax in 1996.

Prize...Champions League trophy

They can, however, argue that history is on their side: a team from Serie A has won the Champions League every seven years since 1989: Juventus in 1996, Milan in 2003 and Internazionale in 2010.

There is little doubt that both teams deserve to be in the 2017 Final.

Real overcame Bayern Munich in a thrilling quarter-final, as well as Atletico, their opponents in the 2014 and 2016 Finals, in the semis. Juventus proved too strong for quarter-final opponents Barcelona and the most exciting team of this season's competition, Monaco.

While on paper it may appear the Final will play out as Madrid's *galactico*

"Losing on penalties in 2003 was very painful, but since I was only 25 I was fairly calm because I was convinced I'd win many more. That's the exuberance of youth"

Gianluigi Buffon on defeat in the 2003 Champions League Final

Venue...the National Stadium of Wales

attack – Cristiano Ronaldo, Karim Benzema and Gareth Bale – against the Italian side's mean defence of Leonardo Bonucci, Andrea Barzagli and Giorgio Chiellini, playing in front of veteran goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon.

But there is more to both teams than meets the eye. Under Allegri, Juventus have developed an attacking verve, which is perhaps not surprising given their Argentinian forwards Gonzalo Higuain and Paulo Dybala, Brazilian full-backs Dani Alves and Alex Sandro, Bosnian playmaker Miralem Pjanic and Colombian winger Juan Cuadrado.

Meanwhile, Zidane's Madrid showed guts to dig deep to get past Atletico when it seemed that their neighbours were about to stage a spirited comeback in the final European game played at their Vicente Calderon stadium.

Juve have only been behind in one match of this season's Champions League campaign – when Sevilla took an early lead in the final group game before the Italians replied with a first-half injury-time penalty and two late second-half goals from Bonucci and Mario Mandzukic.

Allegri has often made tactical changes during matches – the semi-final first leg against Monaco saw Juventus start in a 3-4-2-1, switch to mirror Monaco's 4-4-2 set-up after half an hour, then return to a back three for the last few minutes of the game, when the tough-tackling Venezuelan Tomas Rincon replaced Higuain.

In contrast to Allegri, Zidane has made his tactical changes between matches, resting key players in Liga encounters with lesser sides, and deploying his high-quality back-ups – the likes of Alvaro Morata, James Rodriguez and Marco Asensio – to great effect.

Bale is Madrid's main injury concern ahead of the Final

Bale is Madrid's main injury concern ahead of the Final, which is being staged in his hometown. He is a favourite of Madrid president Florentino Perez, and Zidane may feel the pressure to ignore the advice of the physio team treating the calf injury that kept the Welshman out of the semi-final matches against Atletico.

In those games, an extra midfielder, in the shape of Isco, provided more solidity in Madrid's midfield and Zidane may prefer that security as his side bid for a third European title in four years.

Battle...Juve's Giorgio Chiellini (far right) and Mario Mandzukic against Monaco

Buffon and Ronaldo vie for individual honours

Star turn... Cristiano Ronaldo

In a non-tournament year like this, the Champions League Final often supplies the winner of the end-of-season individual player awards.

If Madrid triumph in Cardff, reigning World Player of the Year Cristiano Ronaldo can realistically expect to retain his title. Meanwhile, if Juve were to win their third European Cup, their talismanic keeper Gianluigi Buffon can expect a crack at the individual prizes.

Injuries restricted Ronaldo's influence in last season's Final, where he was anonymous for much of the game before stepping up to dispatch the decisive spot-kick in the penalty shoot-out. Similarly at the European Championship Final in Paris, his influence on the game was restricted to the opening 25 minutes after he suffered a knee injury in a clash with France's Dimitri Payet.

This season, Madrid boss Zidane has rested and rotated his squad, allowing his star man to thrive in the later stages of the Champions League – with significant goals in both the quarter and semi-finals.

A Champions League winners' medal is the one thing missing from Buffon's trophy cabinet, having been a loser in 2003, when he saved penalties from Clarence Seedorf and Kakha Kaladze but not Andriy Shevchenko's winning kick for Milan.

Cardiff in 2017 could provide redemption for the 39-year-old goalkeeper.

"I became a man and a better player at Juve. It's a great club. Facing them in the Final will be special, because I still have Juventus in my heart"

Real Madrid Zinedine Zidane on his side's Champions League Final opponents

2017 Champions League Final

Juventus

HOW THEY LINE UP

Allegri lines up his side mostly in a 4-2-3-1 but is not afraid to start with a back three or make multiple changes of formation during a game, switching to 4-3-3. The Italian defenders Bonucci, Barzagli and Chiellini form the core of the backline, either as a back three or a four with Dani Alves and Alex Sandro as full-backs, who push on into midfield in a back three. Allegri has not been afraid to deploy players out of their comfort zone – with Mandzukic utilised mostly on the left wing.

Against Monaco, Marchisio came into midfield for the injured Khedira, with Cuadrado brought on in the second half to inject pace into the attack.

Assists

D Alves	3
Pjanic	3
Cuadrado	1
Marchisio	1

Assist ...Dani Alves

Discipline

RED CARDS	
Lemina	1
YELLOW CARDS	
Lemina	3
Mandzukic	3
Khedira	3
Bonucci	3
Chiellini	2
Marchisio	2
Evra	2
Cuadrado	2
D Alves	1
Pjanic	1
Higuain	1
Barzagli	1
Sturaro	1
Lichtsteiner	1

Off...Mario Lemina

HOW THEY MADE IT TO CARDIFF

ROUND OF 16

1st leg: Porto **0** Juventus **2** (Pjaca 72, D Alves 74) (4-2-3-1) Buffon – Lichtsteiner (D Alves 73), Barzagli, Chiellini, A Sandro – Pjanic, Khedira – Cuadrado (Pjaca 67), Dybala (Marchisio 75), Mandzukic - Higuain

2nd leg: Juventus **1** (Dybala 42pen) Porto **0** (4-2-3-1) Buffon – D Alves, Bonucci, Benatia (Bazagli 60), A Sandro – Pjanic, Khedira – Cuadrado (Pjaca 46), Dybala (Rincon 78), Mandzukic - Higuain *Juve 3-0 on agg*

QUARTER-FINALS

1st leg: Juventus **3** (Dybala 7, 22, Chiellini 55) Barcelona **0** (4-2-3-1) Buffon – D Alves, Bonucci, Chiellini, A Sandro – Pjanic (Barzagli 89), Khedira – Cuadrado (Lemina 73), Dybala (Rincon 81), Mandzukic - Higuain

2nd leg: Barcelona **0** Juventus **0** (4-2-3-1) Buffon – D Alves, Bonucci, Chiellini, A Sandro – Pjanic, Khedira – Cuadrado (Lemina 84), Dybala (Barzagli 74), Mandzukic – Higuain (Asamoah 88) *Juve 3-0 on agg*

SEMI-FINALS

1st leg: Monaco **0** Juventus **2** (Higuain 29, 59) (3-4-2-1) Buffon – Barzagli, Bonucci, Chiellini – D Alves, Pjanic (Lemina 89), Marchisio (Rincon 81), A Sandro – Dybala, Mandzukic – Higuain (Cuadrado 77)

2nd leg: Juventus **2** (Mandzukic 33, D Alves 44) Monaco **1** (Mbappe 69) (3-4-2-1) Buffon – Barzagli (Benatia 84), Bonucci, Chiellini – D Alves, Pjanic, Khedira (Marchisio 10), A Sandro – Dybala (Cuadrado 54), Mandzukic – Higuain *Juve 4-1 on agg*

2016-17 appearances (mins) goals

	League		Ch Lge		Cup	
GOALKEEPERS						
Gianluigi Buffon	28 (2475)	0	11 (990)	0	0	
Neto	8 (674)	0	1 (90)	0	4 (360)	0
DEFENDERS						
Leonado Bonucci	27 (2225)	3	10 (878)	1	4 (278)	0
Giorgio Chiellini	21 (1637)	2	8 (633)	1	1 (90)	0
Andrea Barzagi	21 (1419)	0	10 (649)	0	4 (284)	0
Alex Sandro	26 (2219)	2	10 (764)	1	3 (130)	0
Dani Alves	17 (1246)	2	11 (911)	3	1 (90)	0
Daniele Rugani	15 (1078)	2	2 (180)	1	2 (180)	0
Mehdi Benatia	12 (913)	1	5 (183)	0	1 (90)	0
Stefan Lichtsteiner	24 (1714)	1	1 (73)	0	2 (135)	0
MIDFIELDERS						
Miralem Pjanic	27 (1962)	5	11 (837)	1	4 (282)	2
Sami Khedira	30 (2492)	5	10 (805)	0	3 (270)	0
Claudio Marchisio	15 (1119)	1	7 (509)	1	1 (45)	0
Tomas Rincon	20 (1687)	0	3 (30)	0	3 (250)	0
Stefano Sturaro	19 (875)	0	4 (139)	0	2 (130)	0
Kwadwo Asamoah	16 (1290)	0	3 (160)	0	3 (253)	0
Mario Lemina	17 (793)	0	6 (258)	0	1 (4)	0
FORWARDS						
Gonzalo Higuain	35 (2697)	24	11 (949)	5	3 (270)	3
Paulo Dybala	28 (1963)	9	10 (719)	4	4 (189)	4
Mario Mandzukic	31 (2274)	6	10 (824)	2	3 (270)	1
Marko Pjaca	14 (448)	0	4 (93)	1	2 (34)	0
Juan Cuadrado	27 (1860)	2	11 (567)	1	3 (224)	0

(details correct at 12.5.17)

"We knew that Atleti were going to start well and they had the luck to score two goals, but we have experience and we knew that to get a goal would kill them. We are Real Madrid and we have more experience. I rate the Final as 50/50"

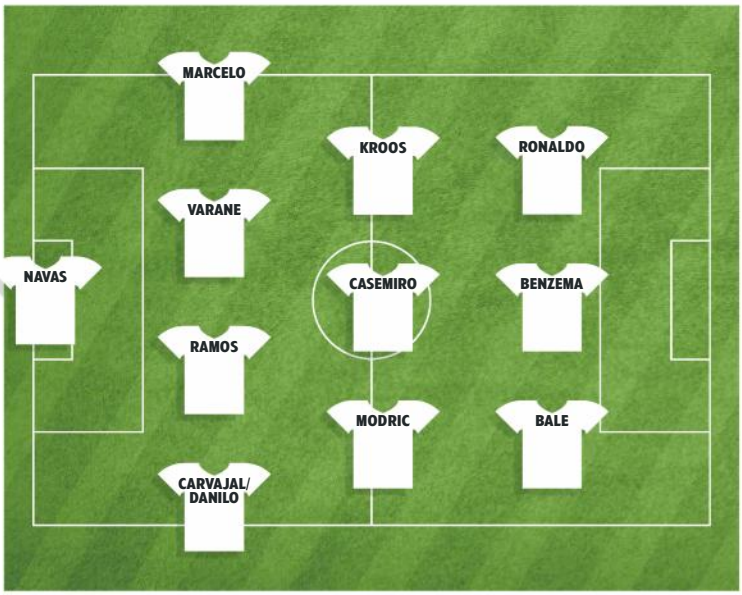
Cristiano Ronaldo reflects on his side's semi-final triumph over Atletico

Real Madrid

HOW THEY LINE UP

If Bale is fit, Madrid will likely line up in a 4-3-3, with a midfield three of Modric, Casemiro and Kroos augmented by the dashing runs of left-back Marcelo.

Alternatively, Zidane could opt for a 4-3-1-2, as he did in the semi-final against Atletico Madrid. Here, Isco comes in as an extra midfielder, behind a front two of Ronaldo and Benzema. There are fitness concerns over Carvajal, with Danilo set to deputise.



Assists

Ronaldo	6
Ramos	3
Benzema	2
Bale	2
Casemiro	2
Kroos	2
Morata	1
Asensio	1
Lucas	1

Form...Karim Benzema

Discipline

RED CARDS
None

YELLOW CARDS

Ramos	3
Casemiro	2
Modrid	2
Kroos	2
Ronaldo	1
Kovacevic	1
Marcelo	1
Carvajal	1
Isco	1
Danilo	1

Booked... Sergio Ramos

HOW THEY MADE IT TO CARDIFF

ROUND OF 16

1st leg: Real Madrid **3** (Benzema 18, Kroos 49, Casemiro 54) Napoli **1** (Insigne 8)
(4-3-3) Navas – Carvajal, Nacho, Ramos (Pepe 71), Marcelo – Modric, Casemiro, Kroos – James (Lucas 76), Benzema (Morata 82), Ronaldo

2nd leg: Napoli **1** (Mertens 24) Real Madrid **3** (Ramos 51, Mertens 57og, Morata 90)
(4-3-3) Navas – Carvajal, Pepe, Ramos, Marcelo – Modric (Isco 80), Casemiro, Kroos – Bale (Lucas 68), Benzema (Morata 77), Ronaldo
Real 6-2 on agg

QUARTER-FINALS

1st leg Bayern Munich **1** (Vidal 25) Real Madrid **2** (Ronaldo 47, 77)
(4-3-3) Navas – Carvajal, Nacho, Ramos, Marcelo – Modric (Kovacevic 90), Casemiro, Kroos – Bale (Asensio 59), Benzema (James 83), Ronaldo

2nd leg: Real Madrid **4** (Ronaldo 76, 105, 110, Asensio 112) Bayern Munich **2** (Lewandoski 53pen, Ramos 78og)
(4-3-1-2) Navas – Carvajal, Nacho, Ramos, Marcelo – Modric, Casemiro, Kroos (Kovacevic 114)– Isco (Lucas 71) – Benzema (Asensio 64), Ronaldo
Real 6-3 on agg

SEMI-FINALS

1st leg: Real Madrid **3** (Ronaldo 10, 73, 86) Atletico Madrid **0**
(4-3-1-2) Navas – Carvajal (Nacho 46), Varane, Ramos, Marcelo – Modric, Casemiro, Kroos – Isco (Morata 88) – Benzema (Asensio 76), Ronaldo

2nd leg: Atletico Madrid **2** (Saul 12, Griezmann 16pen) Real Madrid **1** (Isco 42)
(4-3-1-2) Navas – Danilo, Varane, Ramos, Marcelo – Modric, Casemiro (Lucas 77), Kroos – Isco (Asensio 68) – Benzema (Lucas 77), Ronaldo
Real 4-2 on agg

2016-17 appearances (mins) goals

	League	Ch Lge	Cup	CWC/ESC
GOALKEEPERS				
Keylor Navas	24 (2160) 0	11 (1020)0	0 2 (210)	0
Kiko Casilla	11 (990) 0	1 (90)	6 (526) 0	1 (120) 0
DEFENDERS				
Sergio Ramos	25 (2219) 7	10 (911) 1	3 (270) 3	2 (228) 1
Rafael Varane	20 (1657) 1	9 (810) 2	3 (224) 1	3 (330) 0
Nacho Fernandez	27 (2211) 1	4 (344) 0	5 (450) 1	2 (102) 0
Pepe	13 (1081) 2	3 (199) 0	2 (180) 0	0
Marcelo	28 (2097) 2	10 (911) 0	3 (270) 1	3 (330) 0
Dani Carvajal	23 (2014) 0	10 (885) 0	4 (230) 0	3 (330) 0
Fabio Coentrao	3 (169) 0	2 (96) 0	1 (32) 0	0
Danilo	14 (1218) 1	3 (270) 0	5 (329) 0	0
MIDFIELDERS				
Casemiro	22 (1541) 4	8 (737) 1	5 (449) 0	3 (330) 0
Toni Kroos	26 (2230) 1	11 (939) 1	5 (450) 0	2 (192) 0
Luka Modric	22 (1694) 1	10 (893) 0	2 (180) 0	3 (249) 0
Mateo Kovacevic	24 (1573) 1	6 (217) 1	4 (162) 0	2 (87) 0
James Rodriguez	20 (1096) 8	6 (318)	3 (259) 3	2 (66) 0
Isco	28 (1487) 10	5 (304) 1	4 (211) 0	2 (105) 0
FORWARDS				
Cristiano Ronaldo	26 (2280)20	12 (1110)10	2 (180) 1	2 (202) 4
Karim Benzema	27 (1750) 9	12 (877) 5	3 (114) 1	3 (258) 2
Gareth Bale	19 (1428) 7	7 (496) 2	0	0
Marco Asensio	21 (981) 3	7 (247) 2	6 (466) 3	1 (120) 0
Alvaro Morata	24 (1253) 15	8 (164) 3	5 (296) 2	3 (80) 0
Lucas Vasquez	31 (1348) 2	10 (366) 1	4 (239) 1	3 (291) 0
Mariano Diaz	8 (114) 1	1 (5) 0	5 (183) 4	0

The 500 most important players...

How and why we selected the *World Soccer* 500 for 2017

Another year, another *World Soccer* 500. As with previous years, it is not intended to be a list of the "best" 500 players in the world. It's impossible to compare players from different leagues and continents; any list is inevitably subjective. We have endeavoured to compile a list of the world's most talked-about players – the most newsworthy who, by definition, are the most important.

As with last year, we began by drawing up a list of the key players by league – starting with 60 each for the leading leagues in Europe (England, Germany, Spain), 50 for France and Italy, between 15 and 25 for middle-ranking leagues, and ending with between five and 10 for smaller leagues.

We tried to include players who fell into five different categories:

1 In-form players who have been making headlines in the 2016-17 season.
2 The young talents who have earned rave reviews in the past year.
3 The internationals who are key figures for their respective national sides in the 2018 World Cup qualifiers.
4 Players who are likely to be key figures in the summer transfer market.
5 Those genuine world-class players who regularly feature in World XIs.

Reaching the final list was not easy. There are many players who missed the final cut but who came very close.

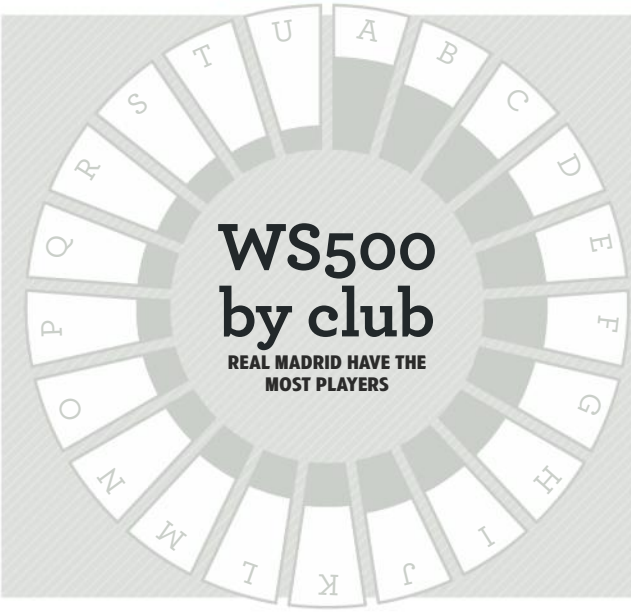
Some were ruled because of injury – we don't know how long Zlatan Ibrahimovic will take to recover from his recent knee injury, and where he will resume his career when he does. For others, such as John Terry, it is unclear where they will be playing next season.

Others have been included as much for their potential as much as any achievement. Brazilian teenager Vinicius Junior, for example, only made his debut for Flamengo in May, but his form for Brazil's under-17 side merits his inclusion.

This is not intended to be the definitive list – merely one to provoke debate and discussion.

● *Read more about the 2017 WS500 at worldsoccer.com*

South America...Santos' Lucas Lima (left) and Diego of Flamengo



A)	Real Madrid	19
B)	Ateltico Madrid	16
C)	Barcelona	14
D)	Bayern Munich	14
E)	Chelsea	13
F)	Juventus	13
G)	Borussia Dortmund	12
H)	Internazionale	11
I)	Manchester City	11
J)	Tottenham	11
K)	Porto	9
L)	Monaco	8
M)	Paris Saint-Germain	8
N)	Arsenal	7
O)	Benfica	7
P)	Liverpool	7
Q)	Feyenoord	7
R)	Hoffenheim	6
S)	RB Leipzig	6
T)	Ajax	5
U)	Manchester United	5

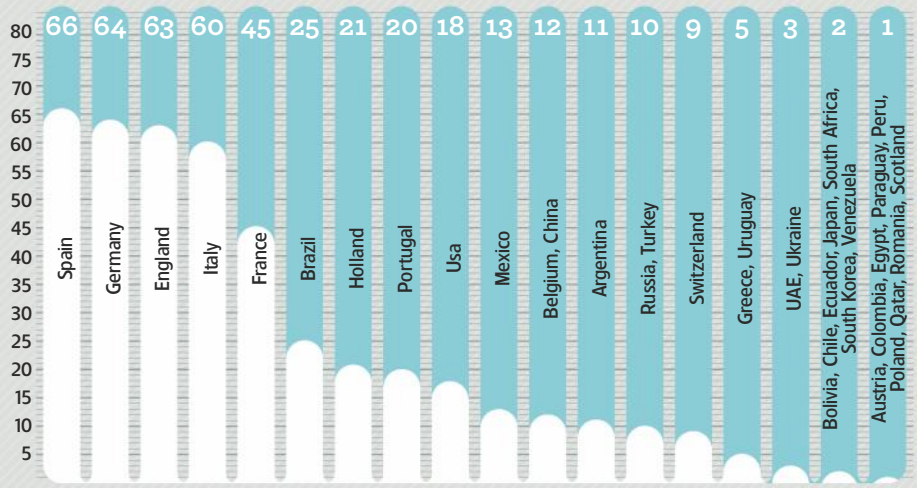
WS500 by nationality

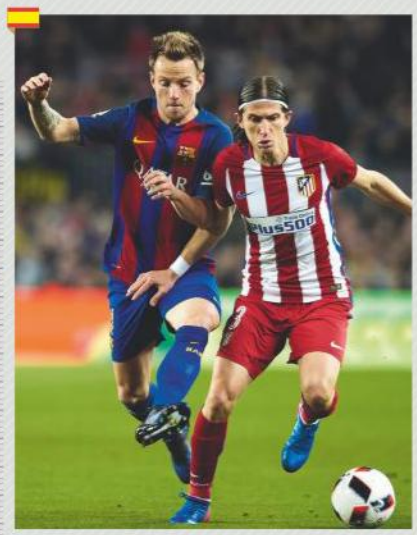
THERE ARE 47 SPANIARDS ON THE LIST

1 Iceland
16 Belgium
1 Norway
5 Sweden
7 Poland
34 Germany
4 Czech Rep
6 Russia
12 England
6 Denmark
4 Slovakia
3 Romania
2 Serbia
1 Moldova
1 Bulgaria
1 Kosovo
41 France
1 Tunisia
18 Portugal
8 Switzerland
4 Greece
4 Turkey
2 Iran
1 Armenia
1 Montenegro
3 China
2 South Korea
3 Japan
5 Algeria
1 Macedonia
2 Egypt
2 UAE
2 Uzbekistan
2 Austria
5 Nigeria
4 Slovenia
3 Bosnia
8 Croatia
5 Ivory Coast
4 Cameroon
1 DR Congo
1 Benin
1 Gabon
1 Zimbabwe
1 Burkina Faso
1 Australia

WS500 by league

SPAIN'S LA LIGA LEADS THE WAY WITH 66 PLAYERS, FOLLOWED BY THE GERMAN BUNDESLIGA





Top...Barca's Ivan Rakitic (left) and Atletico's Filipe Luis

Iago ASPAS

Age 29, Celta Vigo & Spain

New Entry In an era in which players change clubs with alarming regularity, passing like ships in the night, the story of Iago Aspas is salutary. The Galician-born striker is in his second spell at his hometown club, Celta Vigo – chastened by poor experiences at Liverpool and Sevilla – and playing the best football of his career.

This has been the most prolific campaign of his career and the stats speak for themselves, with 24 goals in 45 games for mid-table Vigo by mid-May: 17 in La Liga, five in the Europa League and two in the Spanish Cup. Aspas has been at the heart of a Celta side that press high with intensity, running opponents down and tiring them into submission.

Then there is the small matter of scoring on his Spain debut in November 2016 – as a second-half substitute against England at Wembley, scoring his side's first goal as they recovered to snatch a 2-2 draw in injury time.

Aspas was the Galician boy who outgrew Vigo. His place in club folklore had been sealed as a 21-year-old in only his second game for Celta, a relegation clash with Alaves in June 2009, when the loser would be relegated to Spain's regional third tier. He came off the bench to score twice – the second a 94th-minute winner – to save Celta from the drop.

In four further seasons at Vigo, he helped Celta regain their place in the Spanish top flight – before Brendan Rodgers' Liverpool, taking note of 12 Liga goals scored in a relegation battle came calling.

Vigo reluctantly banked the £7million fee and wished him good luck, but things did not go well on Merseyside. Liverpool finished second in the league under Rodgers, largely thanks to the goals of Luis Suarez, but Aspas found himself way down the Anfield pecking order.

He scored once for Liverpool, against Oldham Athletic in the FA Cup. However, a terrible corner, which he delivered straight to the feet of Chelsea's Willian in a match that the London club won to kill Liverpool's title ambitions, became the defining image of his time in England.

He had failed to settle and a loan move to Sevilla for the 2014-15 season made sense for all concerned.

A sensational four-minute hat-trick in the Spanish Cup hinted of what might have been in Seville. But first-choice strikers Carlos Bacca and Kevin Gameiro proved hard to dislodge.

So almost two years to the day after leaving Celta, Aspas returned to Balaidos for a fraction of the money he had been sold for. His status as returning local hero was confirmed when he scored twice against Barcelona in a 4-1 win in September 2015.

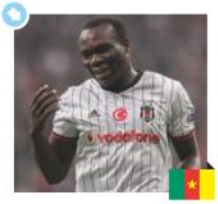
"He has found his place in the world," says Celta coach Eduardo Berizzo.

John Holmesdale

Omar ABDULRAHMAN

Age 25, Al Ain & UAE

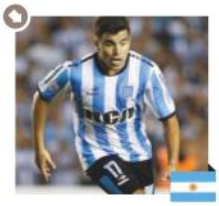
Talented midfielder and the 2016 Asian Player of the Year. Scouted by English clubs during the 2012 Olympics but is surprisingly still in UAE.



Vincent ABOUBAKAR

Age 25, Porto (Por) & Cameroon

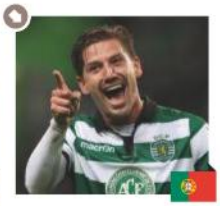
Scorer of Cameroon's dramatic winner in the 2017 Nations Cup Final. Doing well for Besiktas after going on loan last summer.



Marcos ACUNA

Age 25, Racing & Argentina

New Entry Left-winger who was the star of Racing's 2014 title win. Recently broke into the Argentina side, offering an alternative to Angel Di Maria.



ADRIEN SILVA

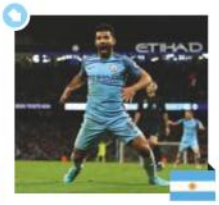
Age 28, Sporting & Portugal

Central midfielder who played a solid role in Portugal's Euro 2016 triumph. A big-money move to Leicester broke down on deadline day last August.

Aritz ADURIZ

Age 36, Athletic Bilbao & Spain

Veteran striker who continues to defy the ageing process. His second spell in Bilbao (since 2012) has been the most productive of his career, with more than 100 goals.



Sergio AGUERO

Age 28, Manchester City (Eng) & Argentina

"*El Kun*" has been troubled by injuries and has not fulfilled his full potential for Argentina. But is still, on his day, one of the world's leading strikers.

Odil AHMEDOV

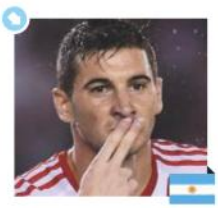
Age 29, Shanghai SIPG (Chn) & Uzbekistan

New Entry An important figure in Uzbekistan's World Cup campaign. Made a big-money move to China recently, from Russia's Krasnodar.

David ALABA

Age 24, Bayern Munich (Ger) & Austria

A hugely versatile figure, playing left-back for Bayern and central midfield for Austria, for whom he made his international debut aged 17.



Lucas ALARIO

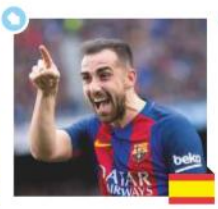
Age 24, River Plate & Argentina

New Entry The latest attacking talent to star for River, having come through the ranks at Colon. Made his senior international debut in September 2016.

Jordi ALBA

Age 28, Barcelona & Spain

Attacking left-back for club and country. Has been consistently outstanding for Barca since joining from Valencia. Scored Spain's second goal in the Euro 2012 Final.



Paco ALCACER

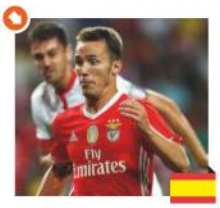
Age 23, Barcelona & Spain

Spanish international striker signed from Valencia for €30m last summer. Has had the unenviable task of being back-up to Messi, Suarez and Neymar.

Toby ALDERWEIRELD

Age 28, Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) & Belgium

The former Ajax and Atletico man has been a key defensive figure in Spurs resurgence. Plays right-back for Belgium.



ALEX GRIMALDO

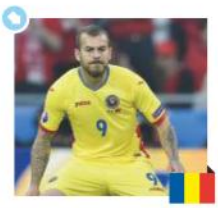
Age 21, Benfica (Por) & Spain

New Entry Highly regarded left-back who has been heavily linked with a return to Barcelona, where he played for the B team before a January 2016 move to Benfica.

ALEX TEIXEIRA

Age 27, Jiangsu Suning (Chn) & Brazil

Prolific second striker for Shakhtar Donetsk who swapped Ukraine for China in February 2016 for a then Asian record transfer fee of €50m.



Denis ALIBEC

Age 26, Steaua Bucharest & Romania

New Entry Re-established as a leading light at Steaua after a spell in Italy with Internazionale. Romania's current player of the year.

Ezgjan ALIOSKI

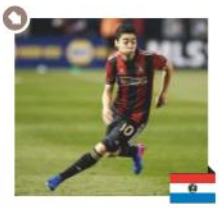
Age 25, Lugano (Swi) & Macedonia

New Entry One of the revelations of this season's Swiss league. Born in Macedonia, raised in Switzerland. Linked with a move to the Bundesliga.

Dele ALLI

Age 21, Tottenham Hotspur & England

Bright young hope of English football, still only 21 but a central figure for Spurs. Signed from Milton Keynes Dons for £5m in February 2015.



Miguel ALMIRON

Age 23, Atlanta United (USA) & Paraguay

New Entry Midfield playmaker and star for MLS expansion side Atlanta. Cost $8.5m from Argentina's Lanus. Already a regular for Paraguay.

Jozy ALTIDORE

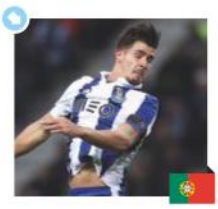
Age 27, Toronto & USA

New Entry Re-established himself as one of America's top strikers after a disappointing spell in Europe. Already capped more than 100 times by USA.

Felipe ANDERSON

Age 24, Lazio (Ita) & Brazil

Brazilian winger who has been one of Lazio's biggest attacking threats for the past three seasons. Yet to add to his single 2015 Brazil senior appearance.



ANDRE SILVA

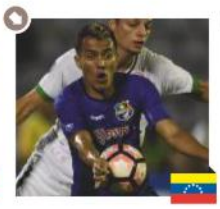
Age 21, Porto & Portugal

New Entry Exciting striker who has enjoyed a brilliant season for Porto, breaking into the senior Portugal side. Has a €60m release clause in his contract.

Pedro AQUINO

Age 22, Sporting Cristal & Peru

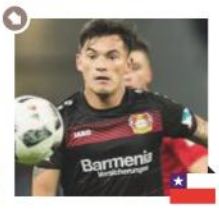
New Entry Central midfielder who was key for the Peruvian champions last year and made the breakthrough into the national team.



Juan ARANGO

Age 37, Zulia & Venezuela

New Entry Elegant attacking midfielder who is probably his country's finest-ever player. Back home this year after more than a decade-and-a-half playing abroad.



Charles ARANGUIZ

Age 28, Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) & Chile

New Entry Versatile midfielder who has been a key figure for South American champions Chile, but has struggled in the Bundesliga.

Nestor ARAUJO

Age 25, Santos Laguna & Mexico

New Entry Central defender who has become a stalwart for the Mexican national side under coach Juan Carlos Osorio, scoring key goals. Linked with a move to a European league.

Santiago ASCACIBAR

Age 20, Estudiantes & Argentina

New Entry Defensive midfielder, sometimes compared to Javier Mascherano, an important figure for Argentina's under-20s.

Marco ASENSIO

Age 21, Real Madrid & Spain

New Entry Gifted youngster, back in Madrid and making an impression after excelling on loan at Espanyol.

PROFILED IAGO ASPAS ON PAGE 34

Pierre-Emerick AUBAMEYANG

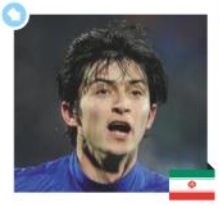
Age 27, Borussia Dortmund (Ger) & Gabon

African Player of the Year in 2015. Set to leave Bundesliga this summer.

Serge AURIER

Age 24, Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) & Ivory Coast

Attacking right-back who has been hit by a series of off-pitch controversies over the past year, with his starting place at PSG now under threat.



Sardar AZMOUN

Age 22, Rostov (Rus) & Iran

Iran's brightest prospect continues to impress in Russia and has become a regular in the senior national team over the past year for the World Cup qualifiers.

Eric BAILLY

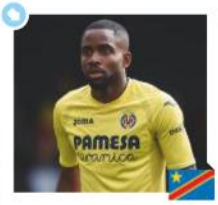
Age 23, Manchester United (Eng) & Ivory Coast

Hugely promising centre-back who has enjoyed a sensational rise over the past two years, making his Ivory Coast debut at the 2015 Nations Cup and moving to England for £30m.

Riad BAJIC

Age 22, Konyaspor (Tur) & Bosnia

New Entry Highly rated forward or left winger who is enjoying an excellent season in Turkey and made his senior international debut in March.



Cedric BAKAMBU

Age 26, Villarreal (Spa) & DR Congo

Former French youth international, now a regular for DR Congo, who has impressed in two seasons with Villarreal in La Liga after a spell in Turkey.

Tiemoue BAKAYOKO

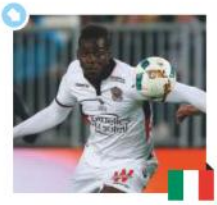
Age 22, Monaco & France

New Entry Dynamic defensive midfielder, one of the stars of Monaco's season. Set to receive big-money offers this summer. Started at Rennes.

Gareth BALE

Age 27, Real Madrid (Spa) & Wales

No longer the world's most expensive player, his leadership propelled Wales to the Euro 2016 semi-finals. Hampered by injury this season.



Mario BALOTELLI

Age 26, Nice (Fra) & Italy

New Entry One of the world's most headline-hungry players has been reborn in France this season, spearheading Nice's rise to the top three of Ligue 1.

Ever BANEGA

Age 28, Internazionale (Ita) & Argentina

Put a controversial past behind him to play an integral part in Sevilla's 2015 Europa League success and thrived at Inter under Stefano Pioli.

Ross BARKLEY

Age 23, Everton & England

One of the great hopes of English football added spectacular goals to his game in 2016 but remains inconsistent and could leave Everton this summer.

Augusto BATALLA

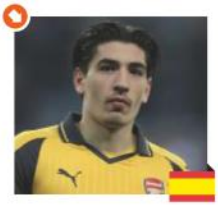
Age 20, River Plate & Argentina

Highly-rated under-20 keeper who turned down a move to Real Madrid to stay in the Argentinian league with River Plate and compete in the Libertadores Cup.

Alejandro BEDOYA

Age 30, Philadelphia Union & USA

New Entry Attacking midfielder of Colombian heritage in his first full season in MLS after a career spent in Sweden, Scotland and France.



Hector BELLERIN

Age 22, Arsenal (Eng) & Spain

New Entry Right-back, one of the better performers in Arsenal's poor season. Linked with Barcelona.

PROFILED ANDREA BELOTTI ON PAGE 38

Wissam BEN YEDDER

Age 26, Sevilla (Spa) & France

Rejected PSG to sign for Sevilla last year. Of Tunisian descent, raised in France.

Dario BENEDETTO

Age 26, Boca Juniors & Argentina

Won the CONCACAF Champions League twice with America, the naturalised Mexican is now back in his Argentinian homeland with Boca.

Martin BENITEZ

Age 22, Independiente & Argentina

Compared by his former coach Mauricio Pellegrino to one-time Independiente star Sergio Aguero. Inevitably linked with a move to Europe.

Dede AYEW

Age 27, West Ham United (Eng) & Ghana

One of Africa's leading forwards, son of Abedi Pele and brother of Swansea City's Jordan, who joined West Ham last summer for a club record £20.5m.

Keita BALDE

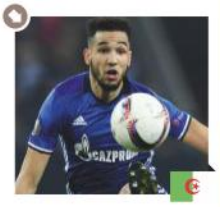
Age 22, Lazio (Ita) & Senegal

New Entry Former Barcelona trainee who once played a friendly for Catalonia. Set to leave Lazio despite a more settled season in which he has often found the net.

Oliver BAUMANN

Age 26, Hoffenheim & Germany

New Entry Important figure in Hoffenheim's rise this season. Recently extended his contract until 2021 amid speculation he could move elsewhere.



Nabil BENTALEB

Age 22, Schalke (Ger) & Algeria

New Entry Thriving in the Bundesliga after being edged out at Spurs. His current loan deal is set to convert to a £16m transfer this summer.

Christian BASSOGOG

Age 21, Henan Jianye (Chn) & Cameroon

New Entry This year's African Nations Cup finals meant a triple treat for the Cameroon winger: a winner's medal, the Player of the Tournament award and, last but not by no means least, a money-spinning transfer as he swapped Danish outfit AaB from Aalborg for Henan Jianye in China.

No one could possibly have predicted the international emergence of the kid from the Doula quarter of New Bell Ngangue. A mere 20 months earlier he had been playing in the anonymity of the third tier of the American pyramid at North Carolina side Wilmington Hammerheads. Even in his first campaign in the 2015-16 Danish Superliga he started just once.

It seemed for all the world that the youngster was on the road to nowhere. However, somehow, someway, it has all come together for him this season. Having enjoyed far more game time with AaB, he earned a surprise call-up to the full Cameroon squad and made his debut as a sub in a World Cup qualifier against Zambia.

He then went on to be a star turn at the African Championship as the Indomitable Lions won their first continental title in 15 years. Not bad for a player who had initially been regarded by the Cameroon media as a make-weight pick, allegedly only in the squad because of a number of high-profile defections.

Starting all six of his country's games in the African finals, he was a major influence every time, twice being voted Man of the Match, and constantly spelt danger with his speed, trickery and strength. He also scored the winner in the semi-final victory over Ghana.

"If I'd been asked a few months ago, if I knew about Bassogog, I'd have been in the dark; I wasn't aware of him at all," admitted Cameroon coach Hugo Broos. "When I did eventually come across his name, I got in contact with some old friends in Denmark to get their opinion of him. They told me he was very good on the ball.

"First, my assistant went to check him out, then I did. I saw his qualities and knew he had to be with us."

Convinced that Bassogog's talents would be a perfect fit in one of the major European leagues, Broos thinks the youngster may have made a mistake in moving to China so early in his career. Needless to say, the African revelation disagrees. Over the next five seasons with Henan he will earn a cool €35 million – the sort of jackpot which will secure the future of his entire family.

Nick Bidwell

Andrea BELOTTI

Age 23, Torino & Italy

New Entry In November, the brightest new star in the Italian attacking firmament gained his fifth international cap when lining up at the San Siro in a prestige friendly against Germany. And he was arguably the home nation's best player on the night, hitting the post in the final minutes of a game that ended 0-0 and earning a standing ovation when substituted.

But even though Belotti's father, Roberto, lives just up the road from Milan – in Gorlago, near Bergamo – he was not there to see his son in action because he had failed to persuade any of his work colleagues to exchange their evening shift with him.

Andrea Belotti comes from a typical Bergamo background where work, above all, is what matters. In recent years, as he has started to earn serious money, he has pleaded with his mother to give up her job as an "ironing lady". Reluctantly, she has agreed – but not before waiting to see just how her footballing son's burgeoning career might develop.

Right now, Laura Belotti need worry no more. If not this summer, then certainly the one after, her boy seems destined to land a huge pay packet as some of the biggest names in Europe – with Chelsea and Manchester United among them – consider making a move.

When Torino's owner Urbano Cairo, renewed Belotti's contract in December, he made sure to write a "Higuain type" buy-out clause in the new terms. Last summer, Juventus had to cough up more than €90million for Higuain, and anyone who wants the services of Belotti right now will have to come up with no less than €100m.

Belotti may be embarrassed about his price tag but the reality is that he is currently one of the hottest properties in Italian football. Playing like an old-fashioned centre-forward, he will run through brick walls to score goals. Able to play off either foot, good in the air and sharp in front of goal, the 6ft 1in striker is known as "*Il Gallo*" (the rooster) after his habit of making a rooster-crest gesture when he scores.

Even though Eder and Graziano Pelle by no means disgraced themselves at Euro 2016 last summer, it can be argued that Italy have not had a truly outstanding force up front since the departure of such names as Alessandro Del Piero, Francesco Totti and Christian Vieri.

Currently coach of the national side, Gian Piero Ventura, was Belotti's club boss for one season at Torino, and he believes that his former charge in Turin potentially represents the future of Italian football.

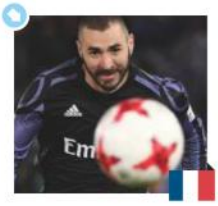
If Ventura is proved to be right, then Belotti Snr should have plenty of future opportunities to see his son leading the *Azzurri* line. Providing he can get the time off work, of course.

Paddy Agnew

Christian BENTEKE

Age 26, Crystal Palace (Eng) & Belgium

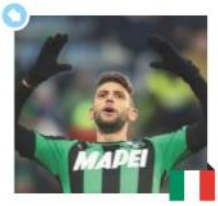
New Entry On song for new club Palace and for Belgium after falling out of favour with Jurgen Klopp at Liverpool. Powerful in the air, with tidy feet.



Karim BENZEMA

Age 29, Real Madrid (Spa) & France

Lost his place in France's Euro 2016 squad because of his involvement in a blackmail case but has had another strong season in La Liga.



Domenico BERARDI

Age 22, Sassuolo & Italy

One of Italian football's brightest prospects. Juventus sold their stake in 2015 though they retain the right to re-sign him and he may return to Turin.

Marcus BERG

Age 30, Panathinaikos (Gre) & Sweden

New Entry Top scorer in the Greek league this season, where he has thrived after a barren spell at Hamburg. Regular for post-Zlatan Sweden.

Valon BERISHA

Age 24, Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) & Kosovo

New Entry Made the ground-breaking decision to switch to Kosovo after years playing for Norway. Brother Veton still represents Norway.

Federico BERNARDESCHI

Age 23, Fiorentina & Italy

New Entry Italian international winger who is set to leave Florence, where he began his career, this summer, with plenty of suitors eyeing him.

BERNARDO SILVA

Age 22, Monaco (Fra) & Portugal

Versatile creator, usually on the right flank. Slipped through Benfica's net as a kid but was picked up by Monaco. Missed Portugal's Euro 2016 success because of injury.

Lucas BIGLIA

Age 31, Lazio (Ita) & Argentina

Lazio's captain is an experienced enforcer and has been a starter for Argentina at the last two Copa Americas. Moved to Serie A from Anderlecht in 2013.

Khama BILLIAT

Age 26, Mamelodi Sundowns (SAf) & Zimbabwe

New Entry Starred in Sundowns' 2016 African Champions League-winning side. The club has rejected offers from Europe for the South African league's 2016 player of the year.

Jerome BOATENG

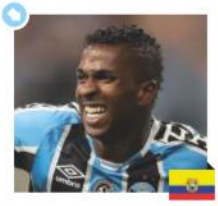
Age 28, Bayern Munich & Germany

Versatile World Cup-winning defender who has thrived at Bayern following an ill-feted season at Manchester City in 2010-11.

Christian BOLANOS

Age 33, Vancouver Whitecaps (USA) & Costa Rica

New Entry Veteran winger enjoying a flourish in his career in MLS, having initially returned to Costa Rica after a short spell playing in Qatar.



Miller BOLANOS

Age 26, Gremio (Bra) & Ecuador

Quick and strong support striker who has had an uneven career, suddenly catching fire with Emelec in 2015. Still important for Ecuador.

Giacomo BONAVENTURA

Age 27, Milan & Italy

Now firmly established at Milan, his industry and flexibility has seen him recognised as an influential figure under successive coaches.

PROFILED LEONARDO BONUCCI ON PAGE 41

Miguel BORJA

Age 24, Palmeiras (Bra) & Colombia

New Entry South America's in form striker last year, winning the Sudamericana and Libertadores.

Eric BOTTEGHIN

Age 29, Feyenoord & Holland

New Entry Born in Brazil, he has made his name as a central defender in Holland, and after a fine season with Feyenoord he has been tipped to play for the Dutch senior side.

Gustavo BOU

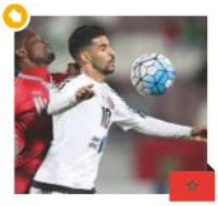
Age 27, Racing & Argentina

Released by River Plate as a youngster, he made it the hard way after being loaned to a series of lower league sides. Was top scorer when Racing won the 2015 title.

Ryad BOUDEBOUZ

Age 27, Montpellier (Fra) & Algeria

New Entry The attacking midfielder has been brilliant this season, his ninth in the French top flight, scoring 11 goals and providing nine assists.



Mbark BOUSSOUFA

Age 32, Al Jazira (UAE) & Morocco

New Entry Dutch-born former Chelsea academy graduate who won the league in his first season with Al Jazira after a summer move from Russia.

Michael BRADLEY

Age 29, Toronto & USA

The son of former USA coach Bob Bradley, he moved back to MLS from Roma in 2014 but has yet to win anything with Toronto. Spoke out against President Trump's travel ban.

Yacine BRAHIMI

Age 27, Porto (Por) & Algeria

Brilliant dribbler with an eye for goal. Was close to joining Everton last year but Porto were keen to earn as close as possible to his buyout clause of €60m.

Martin BRAITHWAITE

Age 25, Toulouse (Fra) & Denmark

Born in Denmark to a Guyanese father and now scoring regularly for Toulouse in Ligue 1. Donates to charity whenever he scores.

Julian BRANDT

Age 20, Bayer Leverkusen & Germany

New Entry Highly-rated young striker or wide man who could be fast-tracked into the senior Germany side. His agent father Jurgen has denied a deal has been struck with Bayern.

Jimmy BRIAND

Age 31, Guingamp & France

New Entry The evergreen former Rennes and Lyon striker is having another fantastic season, with 13 goals and six assists to his name.

BRUMA

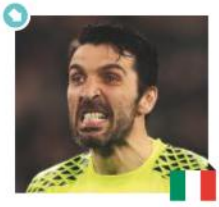
Age 22, Galatasaray (Tur) & Portugal

New Entry Speedy winger signed by Galatasaray from Sporting for €10m in 2013. Has enjoyed an excellent season in Turkey after spending 2015-16 on loan at Real Sociedad.

BRUNO Soriano

Age 32, Villarreal & Spain

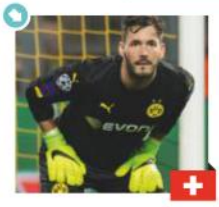
Defensive midfielder and long-serving captain of his boyhood club. Stayed with Villarreal after relegation in 2013 and helped the team back into La Liga's top six.



Gianluigi BUFFON

Age 39, Juventus & Italy

Juventus captain, world's most expensive keeper (€53m from Parma in 2001) and, after his 168th game for Italy, in March, Europe's most-capped international.



Roman BURKI

Age 26, Borussia Dortmund (Ger) & Switzerland

New Entry Highly regarded keeper who has edged out Roman Weidenfeller from the Dortmund side this season. Signed from Freiburg in 2015.

Sergio BUSQUETS

Age 28, Barcelona & Spain

Vital central lynchpin of Barcelona's midfield. A quiet enabler who is highly valued by his team-mates. The son of former Barca keeper Carles Busquets.

Gary CAHILL

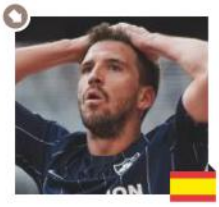
Age 31, Chelsea & England

Central defender signed from Bolton Wanderers in 2012. An important figure for Chelsea, playing in a defensive three following Antonio Conte's change of tactics.

Jose CALLEJON

Age 30, Napoli (Ita) & Spain

Excelling in Italy after a 2013 move from Real Madrid, where he was a trainee but found opportunities to be limited. Has played in a number of roles for Napoli.



Ignacio CAMACHO

Age 27, Malaga & Spain

Former Atletico Madrid trainee who has thrived at Malaga as a defensive midfielder. On the fringes of the Spain squad and linked with bigger clubs.

Nestor CAMACHO

Age 29, Guarani & Paraguay

Left-footed attacking midfielder or support striker who enjoyed the best season of his career in 2016 as Guarani won the 2016 Clausura title.

Emre CAN

Age 23, Liverpool (Eng) & Germany

Central midfielder who can play in a number of roles. Born in Germany to Turkish parents, he has represented Germany at all levels.

Antonio CANDREVA

Age 30, Internazionale & Italy

Right-sided wide man who has been a key attacking outlet for club and country. Switched from Lazio to Inter last summer for a reported fee of €22m.

CARLITOS

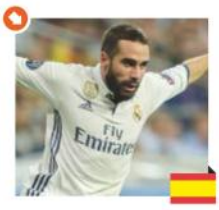
Age 34, Sion (Swi) & Portugal

New Entry Left-winger enjoying an Indian summer with Sion after spells at Hannover and back in Portugal didn't work out. Double winner with Basle in 2010.

Yannick Ferreira CARRASCO

Age 23, Atletico Madrid (Spa) & Belgium

New Entry Energetic winger who has had run-ins with Atletico boss Simeone but is still a prized asset, often from the bench.



Dani CARVAJAL

Age 25, Real Madrid & Spain

New Entry Right-back who has established himself as a key figure at the Bernabeu since a return to Leverkusen in 2013, winning senior Spain caps.

CASEMIRO

Age 25, Real Madrid (Spa) & Brazil

New Entry Defensive midfielder who is a key figure at Madrid and with the Brazil national side after spending the 2014-15 season on loan at Porto.

Nicolas CASTILLO

Age 24, Pumas (Mex) & Chile

New Entry Striker who has been a revelation in Mexico since a move to Pumas in January 2017. His career had stalled at Belgium's Club Brugge.

Gonzalo CASTRO

Age 29, Borussia Dortmund & Germany

New Entry A key figure at Dortmund since a 2015 move from Bayer Leverkusen. Recently agreed a new deal until 2020.

Leonardo BONUCCI

Age 30, Juventus & Italy

The Juventus defender surprised many this April when he turned up at the Olympic Stadium in Turin to watch Torino's home game against Sampdoria, accompanied by his four-year-old son, Lorenzo. Bonucci junior was quite clearly decked out in a Torino shirt, which bore the name of his favourite player, namely the host's star striker Andrea Belotti.

Given that the game took place just a week before the always fiercely contested Juventus-Torino derby, dad had a bit of explaining to do.

"We're at the stadium, he's supporting his team whilst I am having a good look at our next opponents" he posted on Twitter as, to the delight of half of Italy, Bonucci had to explain there was nothing he could do about his son supporting Juve's city rivals.

"Either I ban him from playing with his pals from the creche, or I just have to put up with it."

Little Lorenzo has taken to running around the family home making Belotti's goal-celebration "rooster" sign. However, in the run-in to the derby, which was drawn 1-1, Bonucci senior posted an "ecumenical" tweet, portraying his two boys, Lorenzo and younger brother Matteo, in team shirts: one Torino and one Juve.

Two-year-old Matteo also made headlines last summer when a serious illness saw him rushed to hospital for a life-saving, eight-hour operation. On leaving hospital, Leonardo found himself surrounded by a small group of well wishers and, overcome with the day's emotion, he burst into tears when faced with the TV cameras.

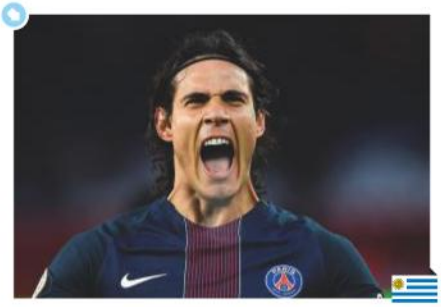
For many, Bonucci always seems like the classic, Italian central defender: a sophisticated player, comfortable on the ball, capable of initiating attacks but also an unrelentingly tough, no-holds-barred defender. So to watch him with his two young boys is to realise that the so-called "hard man" has a heart of gold.

On more than one occasion when talking about Matteo's illness, he has said that the nationwide response of solidarity to his son's illness was "something that did not have team colours, local factions or regional confines". He told Rome daily *Il Messaggero*: "For me it was concrete proof that sport, sometimes, can bring people together."

When asked if the Juventus BBC (Bonucci-Barzagli-Chiellini) defence is the best in the world, he immediately observes that there is a "B" missing. It should have an extra B for keeper Gigi Buffon, adding with typical understatement that the BBBC only functions well because it is "organically" tied into to a winning Juve machine.

It also functions well because the centre-forward turned central defender has steadily improved over the years to indeed become one of the strongest in the world.

Paddy Agnew



Edinson CAVANI

Age 30, Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) & Uruguay

"*El Matador*" appeared to be on his way out of PSG after spending much of the 2015-16 campaign on the bench. But he has filled the gap left by Zlatan Ibrahimovic with panache.

Juan CAZARES Age 25, Atletico Mineiro (Bra) & Ecuador

Playmaker who came through the ranks in Argentina, starring with Banfield before moving north last year. Has rare vision to spot a pass, but needs to add consistency.

Giorgio CHIELLINI

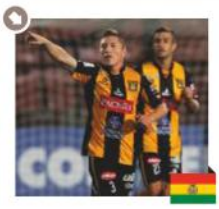
Age 33, Juventus & Italy

Left-sided centre-back who remains the unquestionable power behind the Juventus defence though he is approaching the end, with his contract due to expire next year.

Alexandru CHIPCIU

Age 27, Anderlecht (Blg) & Romania

New Entry Creative midfielder who has quickly established himself at Anderlecht after a summer 2016 move from Steaua Bucharest.



Alejandro CHUMACERO

Age 26, The Strongest & Bolivia

The nickname "Chuma-steiger" might overstate his technical ability, but it does acknowledge his massive energy levels.

Pedro CONDE

Age 28, PAS Giannina (Gre) & Spain

New Entry Spanish forward who enjoyed an outstanding first season in Greece after a journeyman career in the Spanish lower divisions.

Jesus CORONA

Age 24, Porto (Por) & Mexico

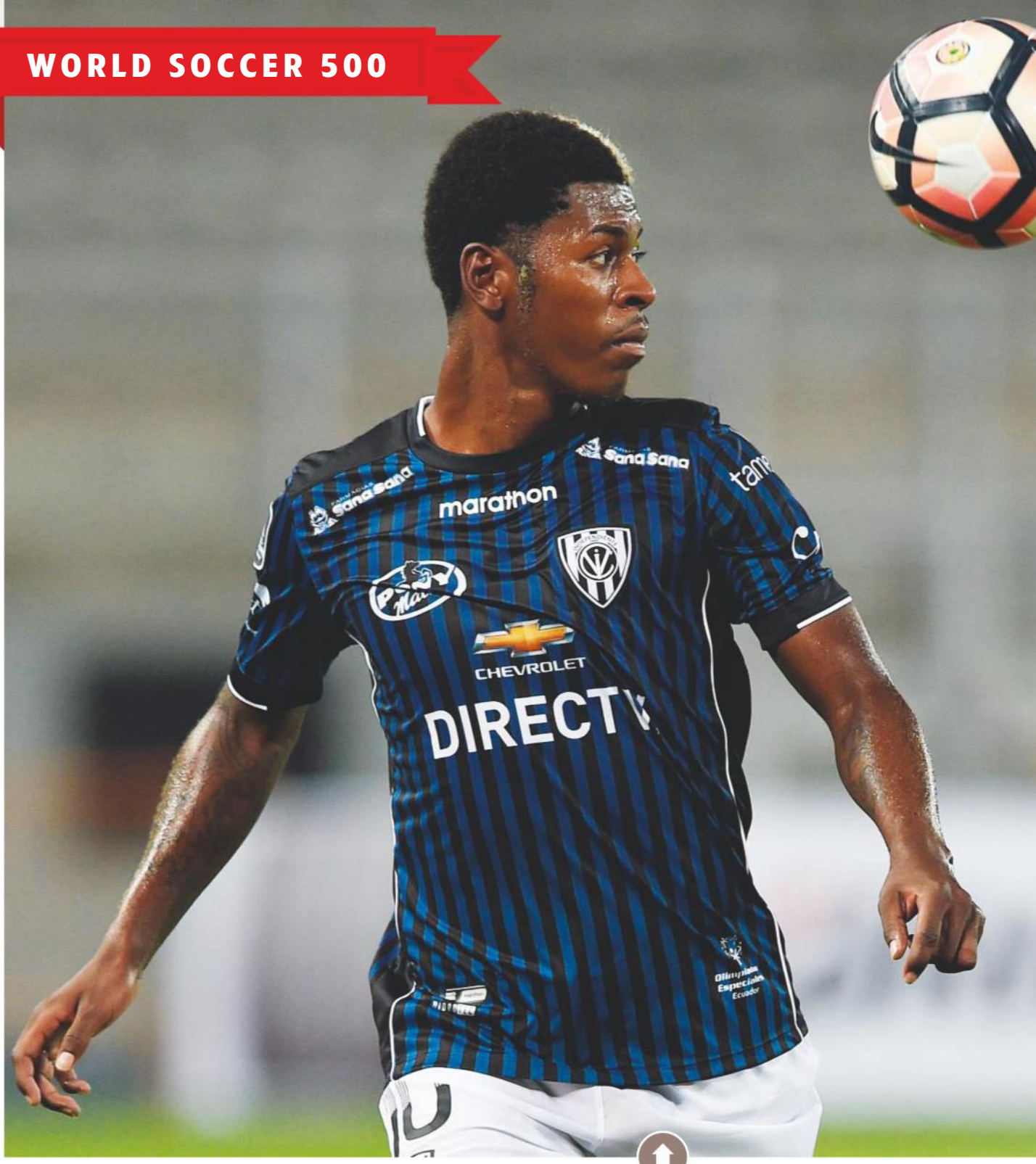
New Entry Winger who has starred for Porto for the past two years and a Mexico regular since 2014.

Diego COSTA

Age 28, Chelsea (Eng) & Spain

Boisterous, unruly but highly effective. His agent Jorge Mendes has been promoting a possible move to China.

PROFILED GABRIEL CORTEZ ON PAGE 42



Gabriel CORTEZ

Age 21, Independiente del Valle & Ecuador

New entry A decade ago, Independiente del Valle, a little club from the outskirts of Quito, were in the Ecuadorian third division. But they have come a long way since then, making the top flight in 2010, going on to challenge for the league title and then shocking all of South America last year as they knocked out River Plate and Boca Juniors on their way to the Libertadores Cup Final.

Such progress is based on a deep commitment to youth development. The club invests large sums in its impressive facilities and this model is based on producing players to sell. Last year's Libertadores starting XI contained two experienced Uruguayans to add some solidity and nine others. While the Uruguayans remain, the other nine have all been sold – which opens up space for the next generation, such as Cortez.

Like so many of Ecuador's recent players, he is an afro-descendent from the north-western Esmeraldas province. Independiente picked him up at the age of 13 and, exuberant and outgoing, he soon picked up the hardly original nickname of "*El Loco*".

First blooded in 2012, he became a first choice three years later when Junior Sornoza was loaned to Mexican side Pachuca, but then had to take a back seat when the attacking midfielder returned. However, Sornoza has now been sold to Fluminense of Brazil, and this time Cortez is making it very clear that he is ready.

A fierce striker of the ball, he is quick and versatile enough to play wide or off the main striker. He is also now ahead of Sornoza in the queue for a place in the national team, doing well when coming off the bench in a recent World Cup qualifier at home to Colombia.

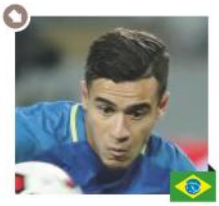
His progress will surely have been noted by bigger clubs. And that is all part of the plan, because his long-term future is clearly not at Independiente del Valle.

Tim Vickery

Thibaut COURTOIS

Age 25, Chelsea (Eng) & Belgium

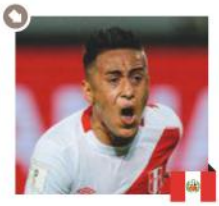
One of the most successful products of Chelsea's loan system, having spent three years at Atletico Madrid. From a family of volleyball players.



Philippe COUTINHO

Age 24, Liverpool (Eng) & Brazil

Back in Brazil's national squad after a resurgence at Liverpool, where he is the side's most creative influence. Joined from Internazionale in 2013



Christian CUEVA

Age 25, Sao Paulo (Bra) & Peru

New entry Skilful Peruvian international playmaker who moved to Brazil from Mexico last year after previous spells in Chile, Spain and his homeland.

Wylan CYPRIEN

Age 22, Nice & France

New entry Signed by Nice from Lens at the start of the season. Enjoyed an incredible campaign before it was brought to an abrupt end by a ruptured ligament.

Mahmoud DAHOUD

Age 21, Borussia Monchengladbach & Germany

Born in Syria but capped by Germany under-19s. Exceptional form for Gladbach this season earned him a move to Dortmund this summer.

Danilo D'AMBROSIO

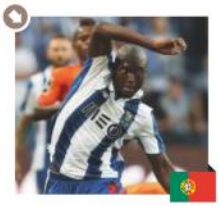
Age 28, Inter & Italy

New entry Powerful right-back, recently made his senior international debut. Made his Serie A breakthrough with Torino in 2010.

Jurgen DAMM

Age 24, Tigres & Mexico

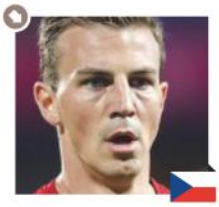
Speedy wide man who has long been tipped to move to Europe. Made his name with Pachuca before a 2015 move to Tigres, where he won the Mexican title.



DANILO Pereira

Age 25, Porto & Portugal

Defensive midfielder who has thrived since joining Porto from Maritimo in 2015. On Benfica's books as a teenager, he was a Euro 2016 winner with Portugal.



Vladimir DARIDA

Age 26, Hertha Berlin (Ger) & Czech Republic

Attacking midfielder, an all-rounder who creates as well as grafts. Established as a key figure for both Hertha and the Czech national side.

DAVID LUIZ

Age 30, Chelsea (Eng) & Brazil

The world's most expensive defender following his £50m move from Chelsea to PSG in summer 2014. Return to Chelsea was questioned but he has thrived in a back three.

Giorgian DE ARRESCAETA

Age 22, Cruzeiro (Bra) & Uruguay

New entry Full of subtle talent and good combination play, but will it be enough to be an undisputed first choice for his country?

Kevin DE BRUYNE

Age 25, Manchester City (Eng) & Belgium

City's record signing at £54m from Wolfsburg in 2015, 18 months after being sold by Chelsea for £18m. The Premier League's leading assist provider.

David DE GEA

Age 26, Manchester United (Eng) & Spain

Agreed a four-year deal with United in 2015 after a move to Real Madrid collapsed at the last minute. Speculation persists that he could still move.

Nicolas DE LA CRUZ

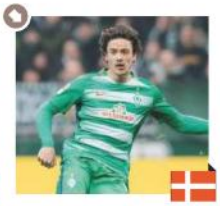
Age 19, Liverpool & Uruguay

New entry Attacking midfielder or support striker with a fierce shot. A key member of Uruguay's under-20s, he is the half-brother of senior international Carlos Sanchez.

Daniele DE ROSSI

Age 33, Roma & Italy

The Italy international has stayed loyal to Roma, helped by a salary of €6.5m per season, but his contract expires this summer, prompting talk of a move to MLS.



Thomas DELANEY

Age 26, Werder Bremen (Ger) & Denmark

New entry The bullish ball-winner has proved a revelation since joining Werder Bremen from Copenhagen in January.

Matias DELGADO

Age 34, Basle (Swi) & Argentina

Basle captain and veteran goalscoring midfielder who is playing some of the best football of his career in his second spell with the Swiss champions.

Mousa DEMBELE

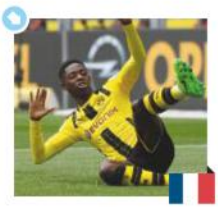
Age 29, Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) & Belgium

New entry Central midfielder who has played a key but often underappreciated role in Tottenham's revival under Mauricio Pochettino.

Moussa DEMBELE

Age 20, Celtic (Sco) & France

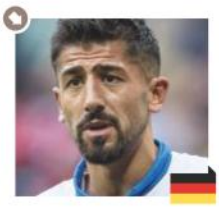
New entry One of the brightest prospects in the European game. Already Celtic's star man after a summer 2016 move from Fulham.



Ousmane DEMBELE

Age 20, Borussia Dortmund (Ger) & France

New entry One of the revelations of the season, his first in Germany following a move from Rennes. Already a full France international.



Kerem DEMIRBAY

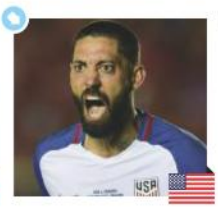
Age 23, Hoffenheim & Germany

New entry Impressive in Hoffenheim's rise to the Bundesliga's Champions League places. Represented Turkey at youth level before switching to Germany under-21s

Diego DEMME

Age 25, RB Leipzig & Germany

New entry Defensive midfielder and an important figure for RB Leipzig in their rise from the second division. Previously promoted with Paderborn.



Clint DEMPSEY

Age 34, Seattle Sounders & USA

Veteran attacker who moved back to the USA in 2014 to boost Seattle's title-winning aims – and won the 2016 MLS Cup. Still a USA regular.

Leander DENDONCKER

Age 22, Anderlecht & Belgium

Powerful defensive holder who has also played centre-back. Has emerged as an important personality for Anderlecht this season.

Memphis DEPAY

Age 23, Lyon (Fra) & Holland

Failed to sparkle at Manchester United despite being handed the famous number seven shirt, but the Dutchman has shown glimpses of brilliance since his January move to France.

Angel DI MARIA

Age 29, Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) & Argentina

The star of Real Madrid's 2014 Champions League Final triumph has revived his career at PSG after a poor spell at Manchester United.

Mouctar DIAKHABY

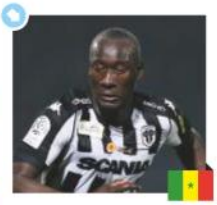
Age 20, Lyon & France

New Entry Another product of the famed Lyon academy, he has established himself in the first-team ranks thanks to his incredible physical capabilities.

Marcelo DIAZ

Age 30, Celta Vigo (Spa) & Chile

A key playmaker for the Chilean national side, the "Chilean Xavi" moved to Spain's Celta last year after spells at Hamburg and Basle.



Famara DIEDHIOU

Age 24, Angers (Fra) & Senegal

After scoring 21 goals last season for Clermont, Angers took a chance on the striker and it has paid off, with him scoring nine goals.

DIEGO ALVES

Age 31, Valencia (Spa) & Brazil

New Entry Spectacular penalty saver with the best record in the Spanish Liga, having saved 24 of 50 penalties faced by April 2017 – a save rate of 48 per cent.

DIEGO SOUZA

Age 31, Sport & Brazil

Has won a place in the Brazil squad as a centre-forward, an amazing turn of events for a midfielder, originally defensive, who has spent much of his career flattering to deceive.

Eric DIER

Age 23, Tottenham Hotspur & England

New Entry England international whose biggest strength is his versatility. Moved to Portugal aged seven and attended Sporting's academy.

Landry DIMATA

Age 19, Oostende & Belgium

New Entry Powerful Under-21 striker whose goals have boosted Oostende this season. A youth trainee at Standard Liege who was born in DR Congo.

Lois DIONY

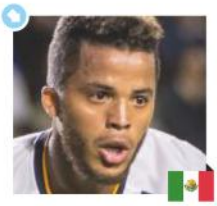
Age 24, Dijon & France

New Entry Part of a struggling Dijon team who are sitting in 17th place in Ligue 1, but he's had a decent season, scoring 10 goals and recording seven assists.

Gianluigi DONNARUMMA

Age 18, Milan & Italy

Hugely gifted, he made his Milan debut at 16 and is already a senior Italy international. Seen as Italy's long-term successor to Buffon.



Giovani DOS SANTOS

Age 28, LA Galaxy (USA) & Mexico

Former Barcelona and Spurs attacker who is now the main provider of flair for his MLS side, as well as the Mexican national team.

Jonathan DOS SANTOS

Age 27, Villarreal (Spa) & Mexico

Former Barcelona trainee who is emerging from the shadow of elder brother Giovani to make his mark.

Bas DOST

Age 27, Sporting (Por) & Holland

One of Europe's most in-form marksmen over the past few season, the Dutchman thrived at Wolfsburg and has excelled at Sporting this season.

DOUGLAS COSTA

Age 26, Bayern Munich (Ger) & Brazil

Talented wide man who gave Bayern a new attacking dimension following his 2015 move from Shakhtar Donetsk but has slipped down the pecking order this season.

Sebastian DRIUSSI

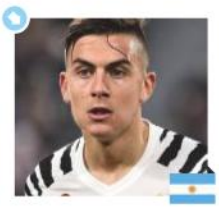
Age 21, River Plate & Argentina

New Entry Prolific goalscorer at youth level for River and now one of the Argentinian league's hottest prospects. Inevitably linked with a move to Europe in the near future.

DUDU

Age 25, Palmeiras & Brazil

New Entry Moved to Ukraine after winning the Under-20 World Cup but back home and captain of the Brazilian champions. On the fringe of the national squad.



Paulo DYBALA

Age 23, Juventus (Ita) & Argentina

Brilliant attacker who has been outstanding for Juventus since signing from Palermo in 2015. Yet to win a regular spot in the Argentina senior side.

Alan DZAGOEV

Age 26, CSKA Moscow & Russia

New Entry The great hope of Russian football ahead of the 2018 World Cup. Missed Euro 2016 with a broken metatarsal.

Soslan DZHANAYEV

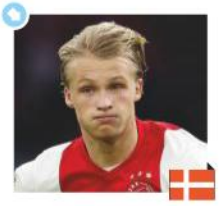
Age 30, Rostov & Russia

New Entry An important figure in the rise of Rostov over the past two years and now a senior Russian international. The best goalkeeper in the Russian league.

DIEGO

Age 32, Flamengo & Brazil

New Entry Stocky playmaker, a teenage wonderkid with Santos who moved back to Brazil last year after 12 mixed years in Europe. Has forced his way back into the national squad.



Kasper DOLBERG

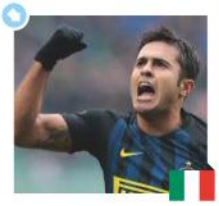
Age 19, Ajax (Hol) & Denmark

One of Europe's brightest young talents, likened to Zlatan Ibrahimovic and following a well-trodden path from Scandinavia to Amsterdam.

Julian DRAXLER

Age 23, Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) & Germany

The German World Cup-winner has made an instant impact since moving to PSG from Wolfsburg in January, with three goals in his first eight starts.



EDER

Age 30, Internazionale & Italy

Brazilian-born striker who qualified to play for Italy through his great grandfather. Moved to Italy in 2006, joining Empoli, and made his name at Sampdoria.

Emil FORSBERG

Age 25, RB Leipzig (Ger) & Sweden

New Entry Reckoned to be the best attacking midfielder in the Bundesliga at present by German magazine *Kicker*, RB's Swedish star is, as sports psychologists would deem it, "in the zone" at the moment.

Indeed, he has been in game-changing mode all season, with his goals, assists and clever decoy runs providing much of the impetus for the Leipzig outfit's remarkable push for a Champions League berth.

Like most of his team-mates, he had never set foot in the German top flight before this season. But who needs experience when you can play with the pace and guile of the left-sided midfielder. No other player in the Bundesliga has set up as many goals as the Swede this term and it's no coincidence that whenever he is missing the *Leipziger* struggle.

"Forsberg has been one of the revelations of the season," says ex-Bayern Munich and Germany skipper, Lothar Matthaus. "He's not a classic playmaker, but is really effective when cutting inside from the left.

"He's impressed me with his technique, his vision and his feel for the right pass at the right moment.

"He also knows when he should go for goal himself and delivers a good set-piece too."

Rumour has it that a gaggle of top English sides would like to bring him on board for next season, but they may have to wait a while. The Swede seems perfectly happy where he is at the moment, especially with the promised land of the Champions League coming into view.

Bought from leading Swedish side Malmo in January 2015, Forsberg is one branch of a footballing family tree. Both his father, Leif, and grandfather, Lennart, were prominent players at Sundsvall – the club where the young Emil started – while his wife Shanga plays for the FFV Leipzig ladies team. Incidentally, all the Forsberg males began their Sundsvall careers at the same age of 17.

He has won 25 caps for Sweden since making his senior debut in 2014, in a friendly win against Moldova, though has yet to fully express himself at that level. Now that Zlatan Ibrahimovic has retired from the national team, he will be one of those expected to step forward.

Nick Bidwell

Antoine GRIEZMANN

Age 26, Atletico Madrid (Spa) & France

The list of strikers sold for substantial sums by Atletico Madrid is a long and distinguished one. In recent seasons, the sale of Fernando Torres, Sergio Aguero, Radamel Falcao, Mario Mandzukic and Diego Costa have all boosted club coffers. Further back, Hugo Sanchez, Christian Vieri and Jimmy-Floyd Hasselbaink moved on, leaving the club better off – in financial terms, at least.

Build them up, sell them on, that has been the mantra sustaining Atletico in contrast to the extravagant, personality-led transfer policy of city rivals Real.

And so it may well be with Antoine Griezmann this summer.

With his penalty in the second leg of the Champions League semi-final against Real, he briefly raised hopes that Atletico might pull off a remarkable comeback – until Isco's goal killed that dream and sent Real into their third Champions League Final in four years.

But defeat for Atletico in the repeat of last year's Final led to speculation about the future figures at the club, including coach Diego Simeone and Griezmann.

The Frenchman signed a bumper contract last summer, with the news announced during a European tournament in which Griezmann emerged as the host nation's leading talent.

The new contract was a reflection of the impact he has had since his €30million move from Real Sociedad in 2014. It reportedly contains a release clause set at €110m – a figure designed to extract the maximum fee from potential suitors in what is set to be this summer's biggest transfer saga.

Such a fee would certainly help to cover the loans taken out to pay for Atletico's new stadium in the eastern outskirts of Madrid.

Manchester United's interest in Griezmann has been well documented and a close friendship with Paul Pogba could influence matters in their favour, although failure to qualify for the Champions League would kill such a deal.

Griezmann would also fit the bill at Real Madrid, where presidential elections are looming and Florentino Perez would be keen. Again, a friendship with a France team-mate, in this case Karim Benzema, could swing matters.

An alternative scenario, of course, is that he stays with Atletico, with reports suggesting that he could be offered a significant rise on his current €7m a year salary.

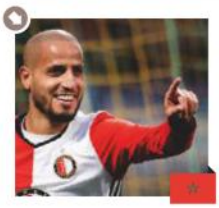
Remaining in Madrid would certainly suit his Spanish wife, Erika, who recently gave birth to their first child. Indeed Griezmann, having moved to Sociedad as a 13-year-old, has spent more than half his life in Spain and arguably feels more Spanish than French.

John Holmesdale

EDERSON

Age 23, Benfica (Por) & Brazil

New Entry Highly regarded young keeper who is now finally established as Benfica's number one almost eight years after moving to Portugal.



Karim EL AHMADI

Age 32, Feyenoord (Hol) & Morocco

New Entry Thriving in his second spell at Feyenoord, helping the Rotterdam side in their pursuit of a first Dutch league title since 2001.

Anwar EL GHAZI

Age 21, Lille (Fra) & Holland

New Entry The Dutch winger from the famous Ajax academy is very highly rated and Lille pounced to buy him for a hefty €7million last winter.

Abdallah EL SAID

Age 31, Al Ahly & Egypt

New Entry Attacking midfielder who has been a key figure for club and country, impressing at the Nations Cup finals this year when Egypt reached the Final.

Bjorn ENGELS

Age 22, Club Brugge & Belgium

New Entry Highly regarded Belgium under-21 centre-back linked with a move to England. Strong in the air, comfortable on the ball.

Christian ERIKSEN

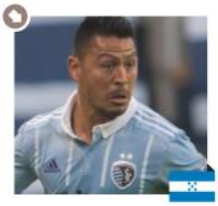
Age 25, Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) & Denmark

The former Ajax star is the most skilful Danish player of his generation. Has enjoyed a fine season at Spurs as they challenged for the Premier League.

Pablo ESCOBAR

Age 38, The Strongest & Bolivia

New Entry Paraguayan-born attacking midfielder who remains one of the best players in Bolivian football and has returned to the national team from a self-imposed exile.



Roger ESPINOZA

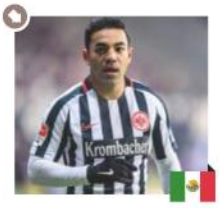
Age 30, Sporting Kansas City (USA) & Honduras

New Entry Versatile midfielder who spent a season in England with Wigan but is now back in MLS. A key figure for Honduras in World Cup qualifying.

Michael ESTRADA

Age 21, Independiente del Valle & Ecuador

New Entry Rangy striker, on the verge of the national team, who was picked up by Independiente del Valle at the start of the year after enjoying a splendid 2016 with El Nacional.



Marco FABIAN

Age 27, Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger) & Mexico

New Entry Mexican national-team stalwart and 2012 Olympic gold medallist who has enjoyed an impressive first season in the Bundesliga.

FABINHO

Age 23, Monaco (Fra) & Brazil

New Entry A target for most big European clubs, this has been another fantastic season for the versatile Brazilian who can play at right-back or defensive midfield.

Frank FABRA

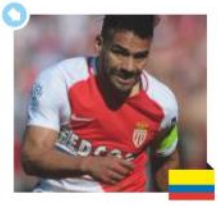
Age 26, Boca Juniors (Arg) & Colombia

Strong, speedy left-back who has established himself into the Colombia team during South America's World Cup qualifying campaign.

Cesc FABREGAS

Age 29, Chelsea (Eng) & Spain

One of Chelsea's "big beasts" but has found himself down the pecking order following the arrival of N'Golo Kante and been used mostly as a substitute by Blues manager Antonio Conte.



Radamel FALCAO

Age 31, Monaco (Fra) & Colombia

New Entry Powerful, prolific striker who has regained his mojo on the Cote d'Azur after injury and a poor loan spell in the Premier League.

FELIPE MELO

Age 33, Palmeiras & Brazil

New Entry Talented but combative and often hot-headed midfielder back in Brazil after 12 years in Europe, and already a favourite with Palmeiras fans.

FENG Xiaoting

Age 31, Guangzhou Evergrande & China

New Entry Lynchpin of the Guangzhou Evergrande side that won the Chinese title last season. One of his country's top domestic talents.

FERNANDINHO

Age 31, Manchester City (Eng) & Brazil

A key figure in Pep Guardiola's City selections this season. Humiliated at the 2014 World Cup but has kept his place in Brazil's squad.

FILIPE LUIS

Age 31, Atletico Madrid (Spa) & Brazil

New Entry Left-back who is now re-established back at Atletico after failing to become a regular at Chelsea two seasons ago. Brazil stawart.

Roberto FIRMINO

Age 25, Liverpool (Eng) & Brazil

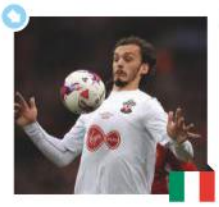
Took time to settle at Liverpool following a £29m transfer from Hoffenheim in 2015 but has thrived under Jurgen Klopp's guidance.

PROFILED **EMIL FORSBERG** ON PAGE 45

Kostas FORTOUNIS

Age 24, Olympiakos & Greece

Speedy attacker who can play wide or centrally. One of the top performers in the Greek championship. for Olympiakos.



Manolo GABBIADINI

Age 25, Southampton (Eng) & Italy

Versatile right-sided attacker who has enjoyed an explosive start to his career in England with Southampton.

GABI

Age 33, Atletico Madrid & Spain

Captain and key figure for Atletico. Under-21 honours but amazingly never capped at senior level by Spain. Spent time with Getafe and Zaragoza before a return to Atletico in 2011.

GABRIEL JESUS

Age 20, Manchester City (Eng) & Brazil

Tricky support striker who starred at the 2015 Under-20 World Cup and has been fast-tracked into City's first team with great success.

Roberto GAGLIARDINI

Age 23, Internazionale & Italy

New Entry Dynamic midfield all-rounder who switched to Inter from home-town club Atalanta in January and made his senior international debut in March.

Kevin GAMEIRO

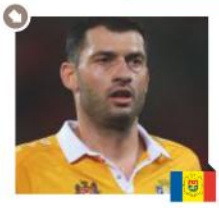
Age 30, Atletico Madrid (Spa) & France

Europa League winner who cost Atletico £28m from Sevilla last summer. Hit a five-minute hat-trick against Sporting Gijon in February.

Bruno GASPAR

Age 24, Vitoria Guimaraes & Portugal

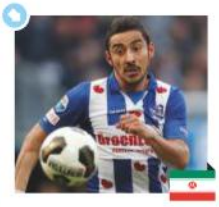
New Entry One of the best right-backs in Portugal, helping Guimaraes to fourth place in the league. Still half owned by former club Benfica.



Alexandru GATCAN

Age 33, Rostov (Rus) & Moldova

New Entry Captain of the Moldovan national side and an important figure in the emergence of Rostov as a major force in the Russian top flight.



Reza GHOOCHANNEJHAD

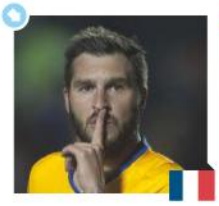
Age 29, Heerenveen (Hol) & Iran

New Entry In fine form during his first season back in Holland and in Iran's push for World Cup qualification.

Faouzi GHOULAM

Age 26, Napoli (Ita) & Algeria

New Entry Left-back who turned down a new contract with Napoli amid talk of a move to England. Born in France and came through the ranks at Saint-Etienne.



Andre-Pierre GIGNAC

Age 31, Tigres (Mex) & France

A rarity: a European enjoying success in the Mexican league, scoring prolifically for Tigres. Played his way back into the France squad for Euro 2016.

Jose GIMENEZ

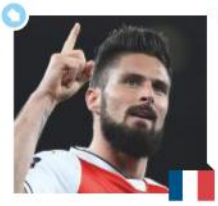
Age 22, Atletico Madrid (Spa) & Uruguay

Highly-regarded young centre-back whose career has been hit by injuries and could leave Atletico this summer. Raised at Danubio.

Sebastian GIOVINCO

Age 30, Toronto (USA) & Italy

The little Italian with the nickname "*Formica Atomica*" (atomic ant) won a string of awards in his first MLS season, including MVP and top scorer and is contracted until 2019.



Olivier GIROUD

Age 30, Arsenal (Eng) & France

Centre-forward who is now in his fifth season at Arsenal. Although not a regular starter, he has the best goals per game ratio (every 90 minutes) in the Premier League.

Kamil GLIK

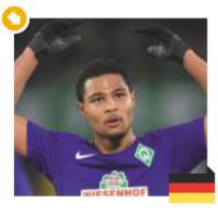
Age 29, Monaco (Fra) & Poland

New Entry Rugged, central defender with a knack for scoring goals. Spent five years with Torino in Italy before signing a four-year deal with Monaco in July 2016.

Denis GLUSHAKOV

Age 30, Spartak Moscow & Russia

New Entry Dynamic box-to-box midfielder who will play a key role for World Cup hosts Russia next year. A 2017 Russian title winner with Spartak.



Serge GNABRY

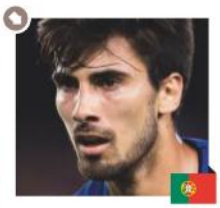
Age 21, Werder Bremen & Germany

New Entry Speedy winger who broke through at Bremen this season after years on the fringes at Arsenal. Also made his senior Germany debut.

Diego GODIN

Age 31, Atletico Madrid (Spa) & Uruguay

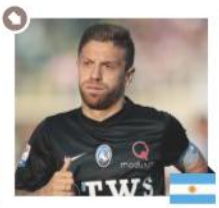
Centre-back who has been one of the world's best defenders for the past two years. Contracted to Atletico until 2019. More than 100 caps for Uruguay.



Andre GOMES

Age 23, Barcelona (Spa) & Portugal

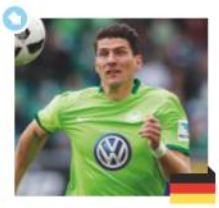
Euro 2016 winner whose summer move to Barca was questioned by many, but he has played some important cameo roles.



Alejandro GOMEZ

Age 29, Atalanta (Ita) & Argentina

New Entry One of the stars of the Serie A season, helping surprise package Atalanta and likely earning a big-money move this summer.



Mario GOMEZ

Age 31, Wolfsburg & Germany

New Entry Much travelled centre-forward who has continued to score goals on his return to the Bundesliga following spells in Italy and Turkey.

Toni KROOS

Age 27, Real Madrid (Spa) & Germany

He may not be the most flamboyant of individuals, nor is he a prolific marksman – averaging a mere goal or two per season during his three La Liga campaigns with Real Madrid – but as a director of operations, Toni Kroos is indisputably pure gold.

Only the very best can hope to sit in the Bernabeu driving seat and the unassuming German midfielder general most certainly fits the bill. Never ruffled, he is always in total technical control and remains as reliable as a Swiss watch in his precision passing, tempo-setting and set-piece delivery.

A player to co-ordinate, compliment and simplify, he combines skill, poise and vision with a tremendous work ethic. A coach's dream, it speaks volumes for his professionalism that no one in the game ever seems to have a bad word for him – especially those who have had the pleasure of deploying his talents.

His first coach in Madrid, Carlo Ancelotti, paid tribute to his authority and playmaking class by dubbing him "The Professor", while Jupp Heynckes, who was his boss at both Bayer Leverkusen and Bayern Munich, unhesitatingly places him among the top three midfielders in the world.

German *Bundestrainer* Joachim Low is also an unconditional fan and says: "His consistency at the top level is remarkable. Week after week, game after game, he performs to the highest standard in La Liga, the Champions League and for our national team.

"You can always rely on him to intelligently link the play. He puts his stamp on the game. Calmly, confidently and staying true to his unbelievable football and strategic qualities."

He may have been a World Cup winner in 2014, as well as a Champions League victor with both Bayern and Real, but Kroos' career has not been all garlands and trophies.

In his early days at Bayern – who he joined at the age of 16 – there were many at the club who thought he was not mentally strong enough to make the grade. One of those was then-coach Jurgen Klinsmann who, being not at all convinced by the youngster, was more than happy to let him go out on loan to Leverkusen in 2009. But after blossoming into a fine schemer in the Rhineland, he would become an automatic starter on returning to Bayern 18 months later.

However, despite picking up honours a plenty at the Allianz Arena, there was perhaps always a feeling at the back of Kroos' mind that he would always be unappreciated by the club's powers-that-be. Denied wage-parity with the Bayern big-hitters, he refused a new deal and, in the summer of 2014, he was sold to Real for a bargain €25million.

And the loss of such an inspiration is a source of regret to this day for Bayern.

Nick Bidwell

Bafetimbi GOMIS

Age 31, Swansea City (Eng) & France

New Entry A big part of Marseille's revival this year, he has been a success on his return to French football, on loan from Swansea, scoring 16 goals in his first 25 games.

Lucho GONZALEZ

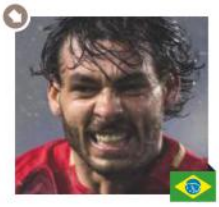
Age 36, Atletico Paranaense (Bra) & Argentina

New Entry Spent a decade in Europe before returning to River Plate in 2015 and moving on to Brazil. A versatile and intelligent player.

Leon GORETZKA

Age 22, Schalke & Germany

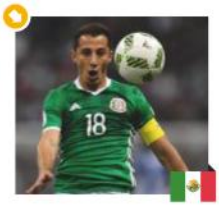
New Entry In fine form for Schalke, he earned a recall to the senior Germany squad. Captained his country to the Euro Under-17 Final in 2012.



Ricardo GOULART

Age 25, Guangzhou Evergrande (Chn) & Brazil

One of the first of the wave of big-name Brazilians to move to China in 2015.



Andres GUARDADO

Age 30, PSV (Hol) & Mexico

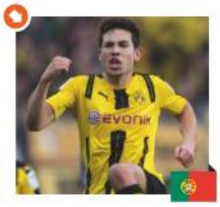
National-team veteran (132 caps). One of the top performers in the Eredivisie since a move from Valencia in 2014.

PROFILED ANTOINE GRIEZMANN ON PAGE 46

Alejandro GUERRA

Age 31, Palmeiras (Bra) & Venezuela

New Entry Probing, creative midfielder, versatile and full of intelligent combination play who has suffered with injuries over the course of his career.



Raphael GUERREIRO

Age 23, Borussia Dortmund (Ger) & Portugal

New Entry Left-back who has made great strides in the past 18 months, winning Euro 2016 and moving from Lorient to Dortmund.

Paolo GUERRERO

Age 33, Flamengo (Bra) & Peru

Spent his early career in Germany, with Bayern Munich and Hamburg. Peru's all-time top goalscorer, he has represented his country at four Copa America tournaments.

Gelson MARTINS

Age 22, Sporting & Portugal

New entry Learning your trade with a club that is one of the game's great producers of top-class wingers is a double-edged sword. On one hand, where better to hone your skills than the school that nurtured such talents as Paulo Futre, Luis Figo, Ricardo Quaresma and Cristiano Ronaldo? On the other, it's a daunting task to live up to a legacy of such footballing royalty. The evidence to date suggests the name Gelson Martins may not look out of place in that list in future years.

When Jorge Jesus walked out on Benfica and crossed the Lisbon divide to take over Sporting in the summer of 2015, many questioned if it was a good fit given his reputation for mistrusting homegrown talent and Sporting's emphasis on utilising its academy players. In the case of Martins, it was never an issue.

Jesus said from day one that he had big plans for the Cape Verde-born wide player, and the coach backed up his promise by handing him 42 appearances, even though he only turned 20 shortly before the start of the season. The youngster responded to the faith shown in him by scoring seven goals in all competitions.

Martins has built on that form this term, vying with Dutch striker Bas Dost to be Sporting's player of the season. If the giant marksman gets the vote, he can thank his chief rival for that particular honour. Martins is top of the assists chart in Portugal's Primeira Liga, with Dost the chief beneficiary of his lethal approach play.

And it's not only on the domestic front that Martins has shone brightly. His stunning performance in the Champions League away to holders Real Madrid in September had the Spanish press drooling.

"Gelson astounds the world with a superstar display at the Bernabeu," wrote *Marca*, while Catalan newspaper *Sport* stated: "Gelson gave an authentic recital".

Often compared to Nani for his lithe, twisting and turning, with his accurate shooting and crosses via the outside of his boot, Martins is more like Quaresma, and in Portugal's recent friendly against Sweden he used the technique to deliver a sumptuous cross for Cristiano Ronaldo to score.

As well as his scintillating playing style, what stands out is his consistency. And having slotted into the dynamics of Fernando Santos' European Champions seamlessly, barring injury he is now a shoe-in for Portugal's 2018 World Cup squad and could well be an automatic starter by then.

"It's been good working with Fernando Santos, who's taught me a lot," says Martins. "He told me to be confident, not to be afraid and to do what I do at Sporting.

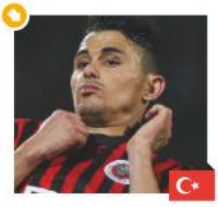
"I want to go to the World Cup. My first goal is to be there, then anything can happen."

Tom Kundert

Idrissa GUEYE

Age 27, Everton (Eng) & Senegal

New entry Dynamic, tough tackler who suffered relegation with Aston Villa but has transferred his skills to Everton with great effect.



Serdar GURLER

Age 25, Genclerbirligi & Turkey

New entry French-born attacker who can play in a number of positions. Recently made his senior Turkey debut after an excellent first season for Genclerbirligi.

Gaston GURUCEAGA

Age 22, Penarol & Uruguay

Not had an easy time playing for one of the worst sides his club has ever assembled, but is a good bet to be the long-term keeper for the national team.

Marek HAMSIK

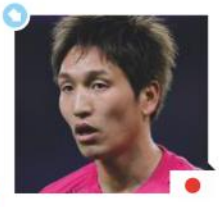
Age 29, Napoli (Ita) & Slovakia

Spiky-haired captain of club and country. Slovakia's Player of the Year for a record fifth time in 2016. Second behind Maradona on Napoli's all-time top scorers list.

Samir HANDANOVIC

Age 32, Internazionale (Ita) & Slovenia

One of Europe's top keepers, an expert penalty stopper who recently retired from the Slovenian national side.



Genki HARAGUCHI

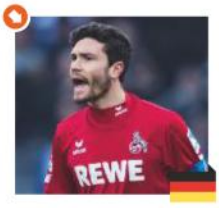
Age 25, Hertha Berlin (Ger) & Japan

New entry One of the leading Japanese forwards in Europe, having spent three seasons with Hertha. A key figure in World Cup qualifying.

Eden HAZARD

Age 26, Chelsea (Eng) & Belgium

Player of the 2014-15 season in England who then lost form last season but is back to his best under Chelsea boss Antonio Conte.



Jonas HECTOR

Age 26, Cologne & Germany

Left-back who is one of the new faces in Germany's post-World Cup squad. Has extended his contract with Cologne but is still being linked with a move to a richer club.

Jordan HENDERSON

Age 26, Liverpool & England

New entry Captain of club and country, a midfield all-rounder whose great strength is his box-to-box energy, although he is injury-prone.

Benjamin HENRICHS

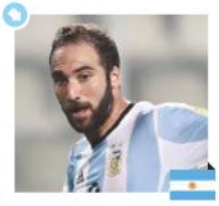
Age 20, Bayer Leverkusen & Germany

New entry Right-back and one of the Bundesliga's brightest prospects. Already capped at senior level by Germany.

Javier HERNANDEZ

Age 28, Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) & Mexico

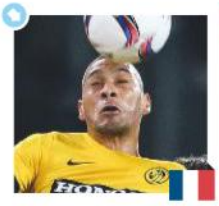
"Chicharito" was discarded by Manchester United in 2015 but has been scoring regularly in the Bundesliga. A huge star in Mexico.



Gonzalo HIGUAIN

Age 29, Juventus (Ita) & Argentina

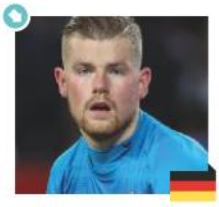
Prolific former Real Madrid hit man who has justified his huge fee, a Serie A record £75m, since moving from Napoli last summer.



Guillaume HOARAU

Age 33, Young Boys (Swi) & France

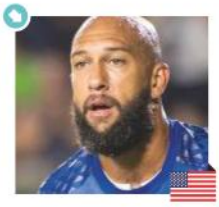
New entry Veteran striker who is enjoying a successful twilight to his career in Switzerland. Top scorer in the Swiss league this season.



Timo HORN

Age 23, Cologne & Germany

New entry One of the best young keepers in the Bundesliga, but yet to be capped at senior level by Germany. Recently extended his contract to 2022.



Tim HOWARD

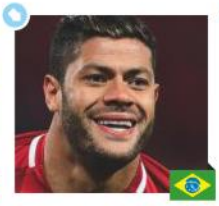
Age 38, Colorado Rapids & USA

New entry Veteran keeper in fine form during his first season back in MLS. Open about his suffering from Tourette's Syndrome and OCD.

Benedikt HOWEDES

Age 29, Schalke & Germany

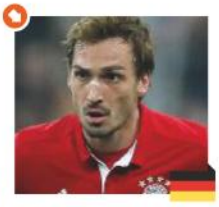
New entry Versatile World Cup-winning defender who played every minute of the 2014 finals. With Schalke all his career, he recently extended his contract to 2020.



HULK

Age 30, Shanghai SIPG (Chn) & Brazil

Powerful striker whose wages at Zenit deterred European clubs from signing him, although Shanghai SIPG are paying him a reported £320,000 a week.



Mats HUMMELS

Age 28, Bayern Munich & Germany

One of the world's top centre-backs and a key figure in Germany's 2014 World Cup triumph. Moved from Dortmund to Bayern last summer.

Aviles HURTADO

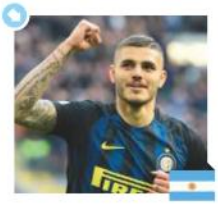
Age 30, Tijuana (Mex) & Colombia

New entry In great form in the Mexican Liga MX, prompting talk of a Colombia call-up, although he is now a naturalised Mexican citizen.

Vicente IBORRA

Age 29, Sevilla & Spain

New entry Versatile midfielder who has been linked with a move to a number of English clubs. Defensive minded but also weighs in with crucial goals.



Mauro ICARDI

Age 24, Internazionale (Ita) & Argentina

Developed at Barcelona's academy but has found success in Italy. On the fringes of the Argentina squad. Wife Wanda acts as his agent.

Kelechi IHEANACHO

Age 20, Manchester City (Eng) & Nigeria

New entry Exciting young striker who has slipped down the pecking order at Man City under Guardiola and since the arrival of Gabriel Jesus.

Josip ILICIC

Age 29, Fiorentina (Ita) & Slovenia

Skilful playmaker who has become a key figure for Fiorentina while also establishing himself in Croatia's national side during World Cup qualifying.

Asier ILLARRAMENDI

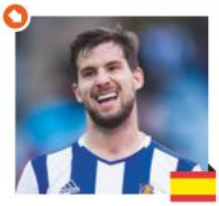
Age 27, Real Sociedad & Spain

New entry Defensive midfielder who has been outstanding for Sociedad since returning to San Sebastian from a spell at Real Madrid.

Andres INIESTA

Age 32, Barcelona & Spain

The 2010 World Cup-winning star and Barcelona captain is in talks to extend his contract beyond 2018 with a deal that will include a coaching role when he stops playing.



INIGO MARTINEZ

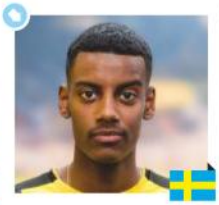
Age 26, Real Sociedad & Spain

Highly-regarded centre-back who remains a Sociedad player despite interest from a number of other clubs including Manchester United.

Lorenzo INSIGNE

Age 25, Napoli & Italy

Diminutive left-winger or inside-forward born and raised in Naples. In sparkling form for Napoli this season, scoring 17 goals and providing 10 assists. Contracted until 2022.



Alexander ISAK

Age 17, Borussia Dortmund (Ger) & Sweden

New Entry Hugely exciting teenage forward who joined Dortmund in January in a €9m deal after his first professional season with AIK.

ISCO

Age 25, Real Madrid & Spain

Attacking midfielder whose form dipped under Rafa Benitez but has started more games under Zinedine Zidane. Contract talks have stalled his progress this year.

Jose IZQUIERDO

Age 24, Club Brugge (Blg) & Colombia

New Entry Left winger who impressed as Brugge won the league title last year. Won Belgian Golden Shoe as the league's best player.

Rune JARSTEIN

Age 32, Hertha Berlin (Ger) & Norway

New Entry Keeper in fine form in the Bundesliga for Hertha and a key figure for Norway's national side under new coach Lars Lagerbeck.

JAVI MARTINEZ

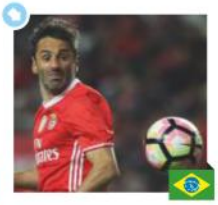
Age 28, Bayern Munich (Ger) & Spain

New Entry Signed as a defensive midfielder but now used at centre-back, Bayern's record signing at €40m from Athletic Bilbao in 2012.

JOAO MARIO

Age 24, Internazionale (Ita) & Portugal

One of the stars of Portugal's Euro 2016 success, subsequently bought by Inter for €40m from Sporting. Has coped well with the price tag.



JONAS

Age 33, Benfica (Por) & Brazil

The player of the 2015-16 Portuguese season has missed much of this campaign with injury but has still managed to weigh in with some crucial goals.

Jermaine JONES

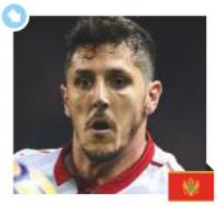
Age 35, LA Galaxy & USA

New Entry Feisty midfielder who remains a key figure for the national side. Born and raised in Germany to a US father and a German mother.

Nicolai JORGENSEN

Age 26, Feyenoord (Hol) & Denmark

New Entry One of the key figures in Feyenoord's title chase this season, having arrived from Copenhagen last summer.



Stevan JOVETIC

Age 27, Internazionale (Ita) & Montenegro

Versatile second striker who has got his career back on track in La Liga, on loan at Sevilla from Inter, after a poor spell at Manchester City.

JUANFRAN

Age 32, Atletico Madrid & Spain

Accomplished right-back who is approaching veteran status, having played more than 200 games for Atletico. Former Real Madrid trainee.

Christopher JULLIEN

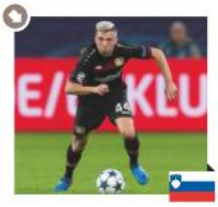
Age 24, Toulouse & France

New Entry After a solid season on loan from Freiburg at Dijon, Toulouse spent €3m on the former Auxerre trainee, who is now an integral part of a thriving young defence.

Nikola KALINIC

Age 29, Fiorentina (Ita) & Croatia

Former Blackburn Rovers striker who has thrived in Serie A since a successful spell in Ukraine and become a regular for Croatia. Linked with a lucrative move to China in January.



Kevin KAMPL

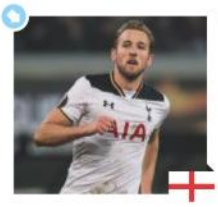
Age 26, Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) & Slovenia

Mobile attacker who impressed in six months at Dortmund before a 2015 switch to Leverkusen. Born in Germany but raised in Slovenia.

Mu KANAZAKI

Age 28, Kashima Antlers & Japan

New Entry Scored the goals that won the 2016 J.League title for Kashima. Back in Japan after an unsuccessful stint in Germany.



Harry KANE

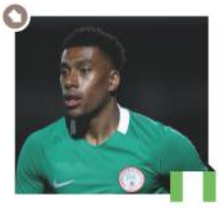
Age 23, Tottenham Hotspur & England

One of English football's great success stories. A complete all-round attacker who Spurs fans proudly claim as "one of their own".

N'Golo KANTE

Age 26, Chelsea (Eng) & France

The revelation of the 2015-16 season with Leicester, now repeating his midfield dynamics for Chelsea, Was voted player of the season.



Alex IWOBI

Age 21, Arsenal (Eng) & Nigeria

New Entry One of the brightest young Africans around. Turned down England to play for Nigeria in the 2018 World Cup qualifiers. Nephew of Jay-Jay Okocha.

Brad JONES

Age 35, Feyenoord (Hol) & Australia

New Entry Former Liverpool reserve now enjoying success in Holland with Feyenoord, keeping a record number of clean sheets.

Pavel KADERABEK

Age 25, Hoffenheim (Ger) & Czech Republic

Attacking right-back who was the Czech league's hottest prospect before a move to the Bundesliga in 2015.

Rick KARSDORP

Age 22, Feyenoord & Holland

New Entry Right-back who has starred for Feyenoord this season. Senior Holland caps in 2016 mean he has represented his country at every level.

Kylian MBAPPE

Age 18, Monaco & France

New Entry On 2 December 2015, a 16-year-old boy made his Ligue 1 debut for Monaco in a game against Caen. He was on the pitch for less than 10 minutes. Fast-forward 18 months and the same youngster's world has turned upside down and inside out.

Having written his name into the history books as Monaco's youngest-ever goalscorer when he hit the net against Troyes in February 2016, Kylian Mbappe has been the revelation of the current European season. His lightning speed and ability to finish coolly in any situation has seen him find the target more than 20 times this season, while six goals in nine Champions League games proved that the teenager is already capable of delivering the goods at the very highest level. No wonder all of Europe's top clubs are itching to get their hands on the boy from Bondy, a north-eastern suburb of Paris.

But if Mbappe's rise has been meteoric in the eyes of the media, it will come as no surprise to those in the know in the world of French football. His Cameroonian dad, Wilfried, is a respected coach at the local Bondy club, while his Algerian mum, Fayza, was a professional handball player. Sporting prowess is in the blood. "And there wasn't a single day that went by when we didn't talk about football at home," says Mbappe.

It wasn't just talk, of course. Having displayed immense promise at AS Bondy, he attended the French National Institute of Football at Clairfontaine. At the age of 14 he was courted by Real Madrid and visited the Spanish club's facilities in the company of his hero, Zinedine Zidane. In the end, though, Mbappe opted to sign for Monaco, in 2013.

Aged 17 he was selected for the French under-19 side and helped the team win the European Championship last year, scoring five goals. "What he did there didn't surprise me," said under-19s coach Ludovic Batelli. "The best players can produce something that you've never even thought of."

Manchester City were rumoured to have had a €40million offer turned down last summer, but the youngster's head hasn't been turned. "Thing are going well right now," he says. "But I'm not getting carried away. If my performance level drops, people will soon forget about me."

He has already made his senior French international debut, replacing Dimitri Payet in a 3-1 win against Luxembourg in March, before earning a second cap against Spain.

"Kylian has great maturity," says national coach Didier Deschamps. "He's confident and has already showed what he can do at the highest level in terms of his speed and ability to find space on the pitch."

The whole of French football has fallen for this modest young man with ridiculous talent. Given the buzz around Kylian Mbappe, though, how much longer he'll be wearing the colours of Monaco remains to be seen.

Howard Johnson

Yerry MINA

Age 22, Palmeiras (Bra) & Colombia

It is a mystery as to why European clubs were not alert to Yerry Mina after he helped Santa Fe to the quarter-finals of the 2015 Libertadores Cup. At the time, Santa Fe would have been happy to accept less than £1 million; now the cost of the giant centre-back would certainly be many times higher.

The son of a goalkeeper, he began his career with provincial club Deportivo Pasto, making his debut in 2013, and he quickly stood out – which is hardly surprising, given his 6ft 5in frame.

Dominant in the air at either end of the pitch, quick over the ground and keen to keep things simple, he was soon snapped up by Bogota giants Santa Fe. And, sandwiched between two impressive Libertadores campaigns, he was in commanding form as the club won the Sudamericana Cup in 2015.

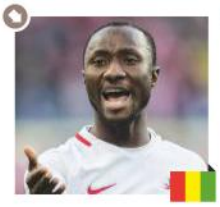
However, instead of making the move to Europe, he went south. Brazilian football pays much higher wages than elsewhere on the continent and is increasingly attracting talent from around South America.

Having joined Palmeiras, he immediately slotted in to a side that won the league at the end of last year. His defensive solidity and goal threat – together with his choreographed celebrations – have made him a huge favourite. But it seems that the Sao Paulo club will not keep him for long. Palmeiras' investment in Vasco da Gama centre-back Luan is surely a sign that they are preparing to lose Mina, almost certainly to Barcelona.

Any remaining doubts about him must surely have been eased by the way he has helped to tighten up Colombia's defence in World Cup qualification. In the six games he has played, the team has kept five clean sheets.

The exception was a 2-2 draw at home to Uruguay in October when Mina made sure of a point with the late equaliser, starting the move in his own half, driving forward and ending it with a typically towering header into the far corner.

Tim Vickery



Naby KEITA

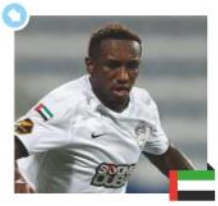
Age 22, RB Leipzig (Ger) & Guinea

New Entry One of the revelations of the Bundesliga season. Player of the season in Austria in 2015-16 before switching Red Bull teams.

Franck KESSIE

Age 20, Atalanta (Ita) & Ivory Coast

New Entry Box-to-box midfielder who has become one of the hottest properties in European football in his first season with Sampdoria.



Ahmed KHALIL

Age 25, Al Ahli & UAE

Asian player of the year in 2015 when Al Ahli reached the Asian Champions League Final. Set to join rivals Al Jazira this summer after more than a decade with Al Ahli.

Sami KHEDIRA

Age 30, Juventus (Ita) & Germany

Back after several injury-hit seasons at Real Madrid. Appointed Germany captain after Bastian Schweinsteiger's retirement.

Joshua KIMMICH

Age 22, Bayern Munich & Germany

Versatile midfielder who is viewed as the long-term successor to Xabi Alonso at Bayern. Played right-back for Germany at Euro 2016.

Presnel KIMPEMBE

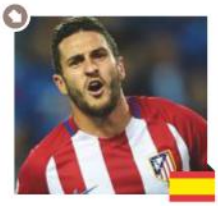
Age 21, Paris Saint-Germain & France

New Entry The young centre-back broke through this year and repaid PSG's faith with solid performances, notably against Barcelona.

Davy KLAASSEN

Age 24, Ajax & Holland

Attacking midfielder, captain of Ajax in their Europa League run and a Holland regular who has played for his country at all levels from under-16. Linked with a summer move to Everton.



KOKE

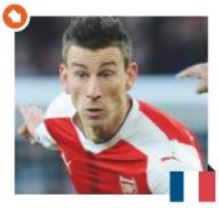
Age 25, Atletico Madrid & Spain

Creative midfielder who has come through the ranks at Atletico to be a regular for club and country. Has played for Spain at all levels from under-16.

Sead KOLASINAC

Age 23, Schalke (Ger) & Bosnia

New Entry Left-back who has impressed for Schalke and been a regular for the Bosnian national side. Tipped to leave this summer and linked with a number of Premier League clubs.



Laurent KOSCIELNY

Age 31, Arsenal (Eng) & France

Captain and a reassuring presence at the heart of Arsenal's defence. Set to end his career at the club after agreeing a new contract that runs until 2020.

Kalidou KOULIBALY

Age 25, Napoli (Ita) & Senegal

Tough, imposing centre-back who has been an adept signing for Napoli from Genk in 2014. Can also play at full-back and midfield. A reported target for Chelsea.

Mateo KOVACIC

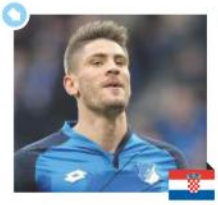
Age 22, Real Madrid (Spa) & Croatia

Elegant midfielder who has yet to hold down a first-team place in Madrid but could be the long-term replacement for Luka Modric.

Viktor KOVALENKO

Age 21, Shakhtar Donetsk & Ukraine

New Entry Attacking midfielder who was top scorer at the 2015 Under-20 World Cup. Star of Shakhtar's impressive title-winning league campaign this season.



Andrej KRAMARIC

Age 25, Hoffenheim (Ger) & Croatia

New Entry Failed to spark at Leicester as their record signing but is now firing in the Bundesliga.

PROFILED TONI KROOS ON PAGE 49

Juraj KUCKA

Age 30, Milan (Ita) & Slovakia

Experienced, energetic defensive midfielder who pops up to score crucial goals, especially for Slovakia.

Alexandre LACAZETTE

Age 25, Lyon & France

Striker whose consistency never ceases to amaze. This year, he has already hit 20 league goals for the third season running.

Alban LAFONT

Age 18, Toulouse & France

New Entry The teenage keeper has heaps of potential and has been an important member of one of the tightest defences in the French league.

Diego LAINEZ

Age 16, America & Mexico

New Entry Teenager who has been dubbed the "Mexican Messi" after bursting on to the scene this year. A potential star for Mexico at this year's Under-17 World Cup.

Adam LALLANA

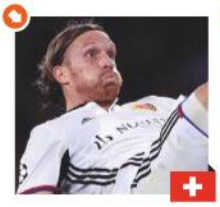
Age 28, Liverpool & England

New Entry Injury-prone attacking midfielder who is a big creative influence on England and Liverpool. A product of Southampton's academy who was initially spotted by Bournemouth.

Adam LANG

Age 24, Dijon (Fra) & Hungary

New Entry Versatile defender who enjoyed an excellent European Championship campaign last summer and has continued his form this season in France.



Michael LANG

Age 26, Basle & Switzerland

New Entry Right-back who has excelled in the Swiss League this season but is understudy to Stephan Lichtsteiner for the national side. Tipped for a move abroad.

Aymeric LAPORTE

Age 22, Athletic Bilbao (Spa) & France

Highly rated under-21 centre-back. Only the second Frenchman, after Bixente Lizarazu, to play for Athletic. Reportedly turned down Manchester City last summer.

Cyle LARIN

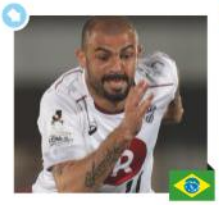
Age 22, Orlando City (USA) & Canada

MLS rookie of the year in 2015, and a consistent goalscorer for Orlando as well as being a key figure for the Canadian national side.

Sam LARSSON

Age 24, Heerenveen (Hol) & Sweden

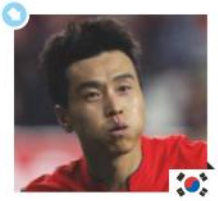
New Entry Left-sided attacking midfielder whose form in the Dutch league this season has seen him called into the senior Sweden side for the 2018 World Cup qualifiers.



LEANDRO

Age 32, Vissel Kobe (Jap) & Brazil

New Entry Brazilian striker who has spent the bulk of his career in Asia, in Japan and Qatar. Top scorer in the J.League last season.



LEE Dong-gook

Age 38, Jeonbuk Motors & South Korea

Veteran striker who struggled in Europe, at Middlesbrough and Werder Bremen, but is now the all-time top scorer in the Asian Champions League.

LEE Jae-sung

Age 24, Jeonbuk Motors & South Korea

New Entry A key figure in Jeonbuk Motors' Asian Champions League triumph last year and a regular for South Korea's national side.

Thomas LEMAR

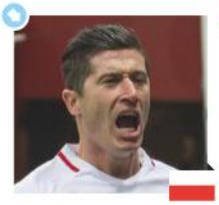
Age 21, Monaco & France

New Entry Born in Guadeloupe, he moved to France in 2010. Established at Monaco following a £5m move from Caen in 2015. Senior France debut last year.

Bernd LENO

Age 25, Bayer Leverkusen & Germany

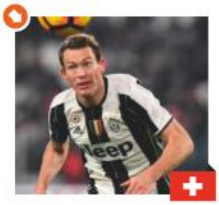
New Entry One of the Bundesliga's best keepers. Contracted to Leverkusen until 2020 but could be tempted elsewhere after six seasons as first choice.



Robert LEWANDOWSKI

Age 28, Bayern Munich (Ger) & Poland

Brilliant finisher who continues to top the Bundesliga scoring charts. Rumoured to be a target for Real Madrid this summer.



Stephan LICHTSTEINER

Age 33, Juventus (Ita) & Switzerland

Energetic attacking right-back or wing-back who is hoping to win his sixth successive Serie A title this season.

Victor LINDELOF

Age 22, Benfica (Por) & Sweden

New Entry Highly regarded young centre-back who almost joined Manchester United in January but instead agreed a contract extension to stay at Benfica for at least another year.

Hugo LLORIS

Age 30, Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) & France

Captain of both club and country. Arguably the best keeper in the Premier League and a crucial figure in Tottenham's challenge for the title.

Nicolas LODEIRO

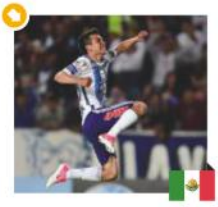
Age 28, Seattle Sounders (USA) & Uruguay

Dynamic number 10 who was 2016 MLS newcomer of the year after joining from Boca midway through the season – and leading Seattle to the title.

Maxime LOPEZ

Age 19, Marseille & France

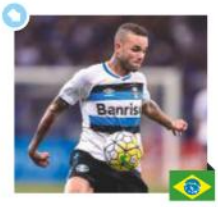
New Entry Has made a name for himself this campaign with impressive performances that earned him plaudits from Real Madrid boss Zinedine Zidane.



Hirving LOZANO

Age 21, Pachuca & Mexico

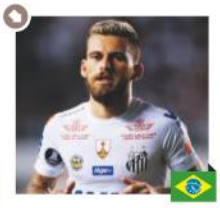
Tricky young winger who has shone for Pachuca in their successful Mexican league and CONCACAF Champions League campaigns.



LUAN

Age 24, Gremio & Brazil

Intelligent striker whose introduction to Brazil's 2016 Olympic campaign put the team on track for the gold medal. Will surely be on the move to Europe before long.



LUCAS LIMA

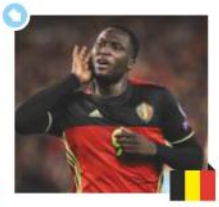
Age 26, Santos & Brazil

Talented creative midfielder, left footed, with the lung power and vision to run the game all over the pitch. A late developer, he keeps turning down moves to China.

LUIZ ARAUJO

Age 20, Sao Paulo & Brazil

New Entry A wide striker with a tendency to run more than think. Has made a big impact in the early months of this year as a result of improved decision making.



Romelu LUKAKU

Age 23, Everton (Eng) & Belgium

Powerful striker who cost Everton £28m from Chelsea in 2014. A prolific scorer but he has struggled to make an impact against the top sides.

Christian PULISIC

Age 18, Borussia Dortmund (Ger) & USA

New Entry Unlike most kids growing up in the American state of Pennsylvania, the adolescent Christian Pulisic did not aspire to be an American Football quarterback and follow in the footsteps of such regional greats as Johnny Unitas, Joe Namath, Joe Montana and Dan Marino.

What energised the young Christian was scoring and creating goals on the soccer field – and on the evidence of his first season-and-a-half in the professional ranks at Dortmund, the teenager, who can play as a winger or an attacking midfielder, is a natural.

The faith shown in the youngster by the club's coach Thomas Tuchel is not hard to understand. Often used in wide areas, Pulisic covers all the high-performance bases. He is exceptionally quick, has ball control to die for, dribbles with the verve of his childhood hero Luis Figo, and is equally happy hugging the touchline as he is moving inside.

And unusually for someone of such tender years, he plays the game with a great deal of tactical discipline. He is a remarkably quick learner and, much to his credit, does not panic in times of trouble.

A good illustration of this impressive strength of character came in Dortmund's 4-0 victory over Benfica in the second leg of a Champions League round-of-16 game. Finding it difficult to adjust to the rhythm of the game in the first half, he could easily have lost his way. But instead, he came roaring back after the interval, scoring with a delicate chipped finish and then forever stretching the Lisbon side's defence with his speed and elusiveness.

"We didn't have any doubts that he would turn it around in the second half," declared Tuchel afterwards in his post-match press conference. "He's a player of great self-confidence.

"In pressure situations, he always delivers on his potential."

Quite possibly the brightest footballing talent to emerge in the United States since Landon Donovan, the *Dortmunder* is, in many ways a genetically bred footballer. His father, Mark, both played and coached professionally on the pro indoor circuit in the States, while his mother, Kelley, played the game collegiately at George Mason University in Virginia, where she met her husband.

It was only natural that young Christian would want to follow their lead, and what a tale of success it has been thus far, with caps for the US under-15s and under 17s; his transfer to the Dortmund youth academy early in 2015; promotion to the first team within a year and then a senior international debut for Team America in a World Cup qualifier against Guatemala in March last year.

Nick Bidwell

Riyad MAHREZ

Age 26, Leicester City (Eng) & Algeria

One of the revelations of Leicester's remarkable 2016 title victory after joining from Ligue 2 Le Havre in 2014. Opted to stay at Leicester but has not hit the same heights this year.

Robert MAK

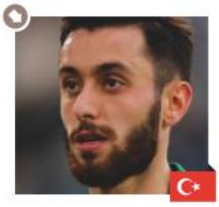
Age 26, Zenit (Rus) & Slovakia

New Entry Right winger who has enjoyed an excellent first season in Russia with Zenit following a move from Greece. A trainee at Manchester City but did not make the first team.

MALCOM

Age 20, Bordeaux (Fra) & Brazil

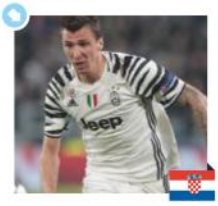
New Entry Young Brazilian who has quickly become an integral part of a decent *Girondins* team that has reached sixth spot in Ligue 1.



Yunus MALLI

Age 25, Wolfsburg (Ger) & Turkey

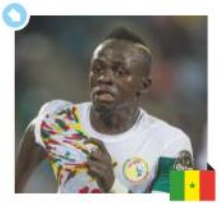
Attacking midfielder capped at all levels up to under-21 by Germany but opted to play for Turkey. Switched to Wolfsburg from Mainz in January.



Mario MANDZUKIC

Age 30, Juventus (Ita) & Croatia

Ex Bayern and Atletico centre-forward who has played a more flexible role under Juve boss Max Allegri, often lining up on the flanks.



Sadio MANE

Age 25, Liverpool (Eng) & Senegal

In brilliant form in his first season at Anfield, helping Liverpool into the Champions League places before being sidelined by injury.

Kostas MANOLAS

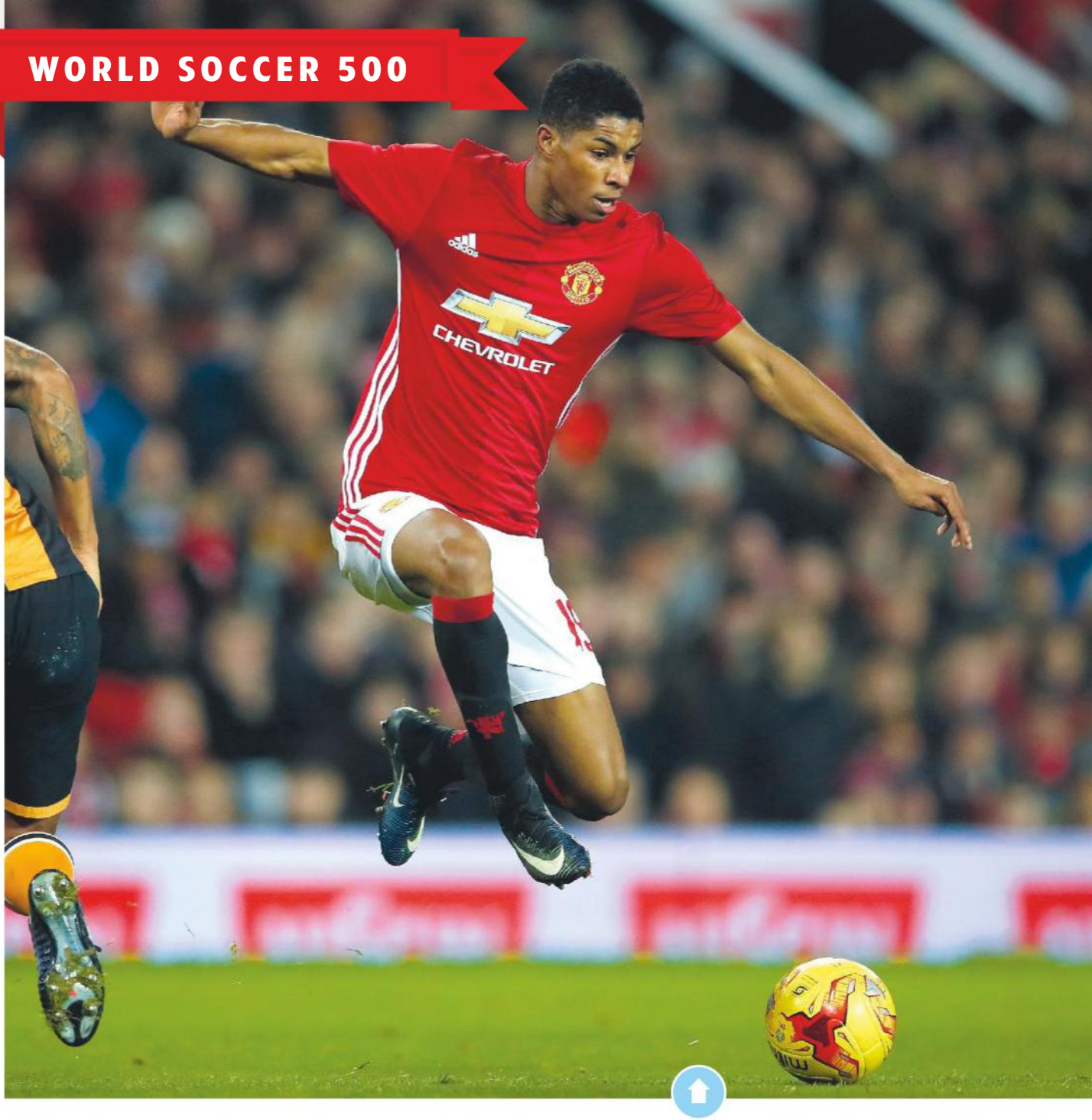
Age 25, Roma (Ita) & Greece

Centre-back who has become the mainstay of the Roma backline during three seasons in Serie A following a move from Olympiakos. Tipped to move on this summer.

MARCAL

Age 28, Benfica (Por) & Brazil

New Entry One of the most admired left-backs in the French league, on loan at Guingamp, the Brazilian has recorded an impressive number of assists this season.



Marcus RASHFORD

Age 19, Manchester United & England

New Entry Manchester United's season has been dominated by Zlatan Ibrahimovic – the egotistical Swedish star who played a Cantona-esque role in their League Cup Final triumph against Southampton.

But Ibrahimovic's knee-ligament injury – a potentially career-ending one – in the Europa League quarter-final against Anderlecht opened the door for teenager Marcus Rashford to spearhead United's attack in the final crucial weeks of the season.

It was a challenge the youngster accepted with aplomb – witness his remarkable free-kick for the only goal of the Europa League semi-final first leg against Celta Vigo.

United manager Jose Mourinho bristles at suggestions he does not promote youth. But with Rashford, there has never been any doubt of his talent. The trail had already been blazed by Mourinho's predecessor, Louis Van Gaal, who gave him a United first-team debut in February last year, and Roy Hodgson, the former England manager who called up Rashford for Euro 2016.

In the space of just 12 months, the boy from the Manchester suburb of Wythenshawe has recorded a series of remarkable landmarks in his fledgling career.

His United debut, when he was plucked from the bench after Anthony Martial got injured in the warm-up of the Europa League tie against Midtjylland, saw him score two goals in a 5–1 win. Those goals made him United's youngest-ever scorer in a European competition, beating a record previously held by George Best.

A Premier League debut against Arsenal three days later saw him score twice and provide an assist in a 3–2 home win.

Then, in March 2016, he scored the only goal in the Manchester derby, his team's first away league win over rivals City since 2012.

And it wasn't just at club level that he made his mark. On his international debut, in a friendly against Australia, he scored the opening goal after three minutes, making him the youngest Englishman to score on his full debut, beating a record previously held by Tommy Lawton going back to 1938.

And at Euro 2016, as a second-half substitute against Wales in the group game in Lens, he made his tournament debut at the age of 18 years and 229 days, becoming the youngest player to represent England at the European Championship, breaking Wayne Rooney's UEFA Euro 2004 record by four days.

After his goal against Celta Vigo, Mourinho said: "Marcus I trust and it doesn't matter if he scores or if he doesn't score. He is fantastic in his effort and his attitude."

From the "Sceptical One", that is praise indeed.

John Holmesdale

Ivan MARCANO

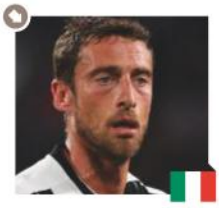
Age 29, Porto (Por) & Spain

New Entry One of the most admired left-backs playing in the Portuguese league, the Spaniard has recorded an impressive seven assists this season.

MARCELO

Age 29, Real Madrid (Spa) & Brazil

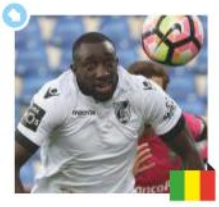
Brilliant attacking left-back and Madrid stalwart, since 2007, who was blamed for Brazil's 2014 World Cup humiliation but is now back in the squad.



Claudio MARCHISIO

Age 31, Juventus & Italy

Turin-born, a cornerstone of the Juventus midfield for the past nine seasons. Back in action after missing Euro 2016 with a cruciate knee ligament injury.



Moussa MAREGA

Age 26, Porto (Por) & Mali

New Entry French born striker thriving on loan at Guimaraes. A 2016 move to Sporting was hijacked by Porto.

PROFILED GELSON MARTINS ON PAGE 50

Nemanja MATIC

Age 28, Chelsea (Eng) & Serbia

In excellent form for Chelsea this term after stalling in the first half of last season.

Joel MATIP

Age 25, Liverpool (Eng) & Cameroon

Strong, composed centre-back who is already a key figure at Anfield. A leading refusenik for Cameroon at the 2017 Nations Cup.

Blaise MATUIDI

Age 30, Paris Saint-Germain & France

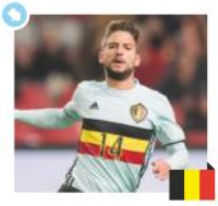
Has had a good campaign for the capital club. Joined from Saint-Etienne in 2011.

PROFILED KYLIAN MBAPPE ON PAGE 53

Kara MBODJI

Age 27, Anderlecht (Blg) & Senegal

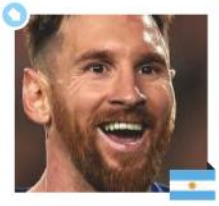
New Entry Powerful centre-back who also plays in midfield. Linked with a move to England.



Dries MERTENS

Age 30, Napoli (Ita) & Belgium

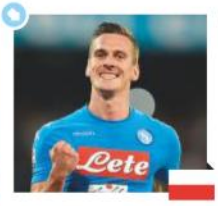
Clever wide man or attacker who was once rejected by Anderlecht for being too small. In brilliant goalscoring form for Napoli in 2016-17 in a more central role.



Lionel MESSI

Age 29, Barcelona (Spa) & Argentina

The rivalry with Ronaldo continues to produce brilliant performances. His leadership will be needed by Argentina in their remaining World Cup qualifiers.



Arkadiusz MILIK

Age 23, Napoli (Ita) & Poland

Moved to Napoli last summer, as one of the replacements for Juventus-bound Gonzalo Higuain, having previously starred in the Dutch league for Ajax.

Luka MILIVOJEVIC

Age 26, Crystal Palace (Eng) & Serbia

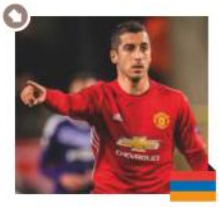
New Entry Tough defensive midfielder who has impressed for Palace since a move from Olympiakos. A key figure in Serbia's recent revival.

MIRANDA

Age 32, Internazionale (Ita) & Brazil

Outstanding centre-back who is increasingly important for Brazil's national side.

PROFILED YERRY MINA ON PAGE 54



Henrikh MKHITARYAN

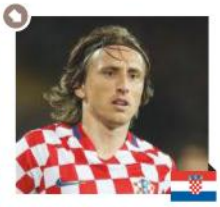
Age 28, Manchester United (Eng) & Armenia

Armenia's leading player had a slow start in England following last summer's move from Dortmund but has grown in stature.

Anthony MODESTE

Age 29, Cologne (Ger) & France

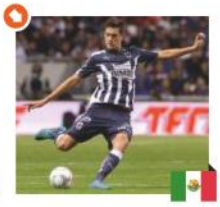
New Entry One-time Blackburn failure now enjoying his best ever season, scoring bags of goals in Cologne's challenge for a European place.



Luka MODRIC

Age 31, Real Madrid (Spa) & Croatia

Outstanding playmaker for club and country. Last year he agreed an extension to his contract to keep him in Madrid until 2020.



Cesar MONTES

Age 20, Monterrey & Mexico

One of Mexican football's outstanding young prospects. The imposing central defender has been watched by a number of European clubs, including Roma.

Alvaro MORATA

Age 24, Real Madrid & Spain

Striker who returned to Real Madrid after helping Juventus to the 2015 Champions League Final. Mostly used as a substitute but has an excellent scoring rate.

Hector MORENO

Age 29, PSV (Hol) & Mexico

Tough-tackling centre-back infamous for breaking the leg of Manchester United defender Luke Shaw in 2015. A world under-17 champion with Mexico in 2005.

Jordan MORRIS

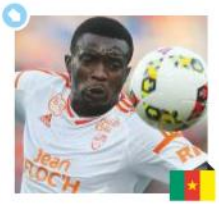
Age 22, Seattle Sounders & USA

One of the bright young hopes of the American game, a title winner with Seattle last year. Turned down Werder Bremen to debut in MLS.

Victor MOSES

Age 26, Chelsea (Eng) & Nigeria

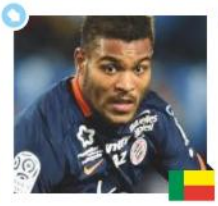
New Entry Former winger who has thrived in the new wing-back role handed to him by Chelsea boss Antonio Conte.



Benjamin MOUKANDJO

Age 28, Lorient (Fra) & Cameroon

One of the few plus points in Lorient's disappointing league campaign. A star of Cameroon's 2017 Nations Cup win.



Steve MOUNIE

Age 22, Montpellier (Fra) & Benin

New Entry Signed by Montpellier from Nimes in the summer and he has proven he can do it on the big stage after scoring 13 goals.

Youssef MSAKNI

Age 26, Al Lekhwiya (Qat) & Tunisia

Qatar-based attacker who impressed for Tunisia at the 2017 Nations Cup. Moved to Qatar directly from Esperance in his home country.

Thomas MULLER

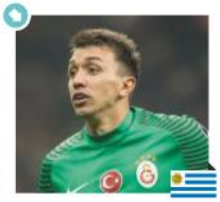
Age 27, Bayern Munich & Germany

Arguably the biggest star of German football, a brilliantly effective goalscorer on his day, but he struggled to raise his game against top opposition in this season's Champions League.

Luis MURIEL

Age 26, Sampdoria (Ita) & Colombia

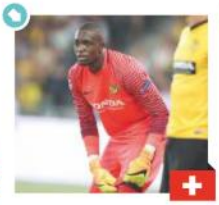
Stocky South American striker brought to Europe by Udinese. Now at Sampdoria but linked with a summer transfer away.



Fernando MUSLERA

Age 30, Galatasaray (Tur) & Uruguay

New Entry One of the world's top keepers, in excellent form in the Turkish league, prompting talk of a move to a west European league.



Yvon MVOGO

Age 22, Young Boys & Switzerland

Highly-rated Cameroon-born keeper who is said to be on the wanted list of a number of German Bundesliga clubs.

NACHO

Age 27, Real Madrid & Spain

New Entry Highly versatile defender who has been one of the unsung stars of Real's season having come through the ranks with his brother Alex, who is now at Elche.

Adam NAGY

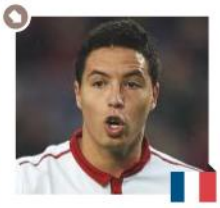
Age 21, Bologna (Ita) & Hungary

New Entry Defensive midfielder who has enjoyed a positive first season in Serie A at Bologna after impressing for Hungary at Euro 2016.

Radja NAINGGOLAN

Age 29, Roma (Ita) & Belgium

All-action midfielder, nicknamed "The Ninja", who moved to Italy as a teenager and became a key figure for Roma. Heavily linked with a summer transfer to Chelsea.



Samir NASRI

Age 29, Manchester City (Eng) & France

New Entry Talented midfielder who has been criticised for inconsistency and attitude, but has enjoyed a revival on loan at Spain's Sevilla.

Keylor NAVAS

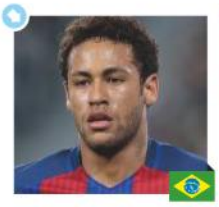
Age 30, Real Madrid (Spa) & Costa Rica

The most high-profile Costan Rican in Europe. Became Real Madrid's first choice last year after their attempts to sign David De Gea failed.

Wilfred NDIDI

Age 20, Leicester City (Eng) & Nigeria

New Entry Highly effective defensive midfielder who was signed by Leicester for £17m from Genk to replace Chelsea-bound N'Golo Kante.



NEYMAR

Age 25, Barcelona (Spa) & Brazil

Dazzling alongside Messi and Suarez, but faces the distraction of a suspended prison sentence from a fraud case resulting from his 2013 transfer.

Steven NZONZI

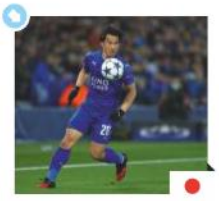
Age 28, Sevilla (Spa) & France

New Entry Former Blackburn and Stoke man has thrived in Spain following a move to Sevilla and a reinvention from a midfield destroyer to a more creative role.

Jan OBLAK

Age 24, Atletico Madrid (Spa) & Slovenia

New Entry In brilliant form for Atletico this season. Replaced Samir Handanovic as Slovenia's first-choice keeper in the World Cup qualifiers.



Shinji OKAZAKI

Age 31, Leicester City (Eng) & Japan

Energetic Japanese striker who was mediocre during a spell in the Bundesliga but starred in Leicester's remarkable league triumph.

Henry ONYEKURU

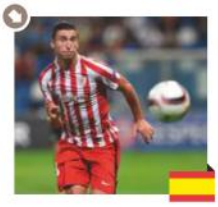
Age 19, Eupen (Blg) & Nigeria

New Entry In prolific form in the Belgian league for Eupen, the club owned by Qatar's Aspire Foundation, who run the youth academy where the Nigerian was developed.

Jefferson OREJUELA

Age 24, Fluminense (Bra) & Ecuador

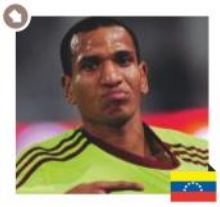
New Entry Central midfielder who excelled for Independiente del Valle when reaching the Final of the 2016 Libertadores Cup, winning a national team call-up and a move to Brazil.



OSCAR de Marcos

Age 28, Athletic Bilbao & Spain

New Entry Versatile operator (midfield or full-back) who has spent the bulk of his career at Athletic but has been heavily linked with a move to the Premier League.



Romulo OTERO

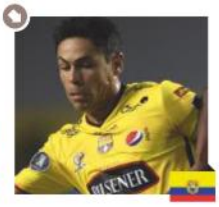
Age 24, Atletico Mineiro (Bra) & Venezuela

New Entry Little attacking midfielder signed last year after a spell in Chile. Catches the eye mainly for his spectacularly struck free-kicks.

Mikel OYARZABAL

Age 20, Real Sociedad & Spain

New Entry Left-winger and the latest Sociedad trainee to be tipped for greatness. Became the youngest Sociedad player to make an international debut, in 2016.



Matias OYOLA

Age 34, Barcelona & Ecuador

New Entry Born in Argentina but recently capped by Ecuador, an intelligent midfielder who is the heartbeat of the country's reigning champions.

Darlington NAGBE

Age 26, Portland Timbers & USA

New Entry Liberia-born attacker who has excelled at Portland and broken into the US national side. Linked with a move to Celtic in January.

Manuel NEUER

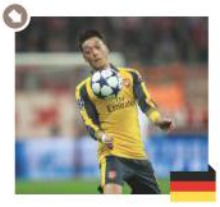
Age 31, Bayern Munich & Germany

Widely regarded as the world's best keeper after winning honours with club and country, he is contracted to Bayern until 2021.

Willi ORBAN

Age 24, RB Leipzig & Germany

New Entry Young centre-back who has been the cornerstone of RB Leipzig's unlikely Bundesliga title challenge. Joined from home-town club Kaiserslautern in 2015.



Mesut OZIL

Age 28, Arsenal (Eng) & Germany

Big name who has failed to live up to his reputation as Arsenal's chief creator this season. Could move on this summer if the price is right.

Patrik SCHICK

Age 21, Sampdoria (Ita) & Czech Republic

New Entry If Sampdoria's Czech striker is one of Europe's hottest properties, the mass interest can be explained in just two adjectives: deadly and elegant.

In his inaugural season in Serie A following a €4million move last summer from his home-town side Sparta Prague, he has not only had the gallery purring with his stupendous close control and stylish dominance in one-on-one situations. But he has also proved to be the ultimate impact player, invariably on the score-sheet for Sampdoria when brought on as a substitute.

Tall with a military bearing, and yet so mobile and skilful, he is an absolute nightmare for defenders to read. Although by now they know that he loves to cut in from the right flank before unleashing a powerful left-foot shot, stopping him remains a major problem. Always seemingly one step ahead of his marker, he is clever in his ability to manoeuvre the ball and to work space for himself.

With Schick you have to expect the unexpected, and he certainly did that recently with a wonder goal against Crotone. Collecting a pass with his back to goal, he flicked the ball around his marker, retrieved it and then advanced before calmly slotting home. It was a moment of sheer class that was reminiscent of Dennis Bergkamp's famous effort for Arsenal against Newcastle United 15 years ago.

However, it is another Dutch star that he is drawing comparisons with, as many observers liken him to the great Milan front man Marco Van Basten.

Eric Cantona and Zlatan Ibrahimovic are other names that have been put forward, but the player himself talks of other influences, saying: "My role model is Cristiano Ronaldo. He blew me away when I saw him play for the first time at Euro 2012. He's my number one idol to this day."

The all-important question is, what does the immediate future hold for the starlet? Samp might still see him as a work in progress – hence the reluctance of coach Marco Giampaolo to start him more regularly – but with so many clubs ready and willing to pay his €25m release clause, will the *Blucerchiati* be able to resist? One possible outcome would be for a buyer to secure a deal now, and then loan him back to Sampdoria for another season.

Typically, the youngster is keeping his cool: "For now I'm not paying attention to the rumours," he offers. "At the moment I'm only concentrating on doing well for Samp and playing as much as possible.

"Back in the summer I chose Samp over Roma. I did so because I thought I'd have more opportunities here."

Having made his senior international debut for the Czech Republic in a friendly versus Malta last year, and with three caps to date, the best, quite clearly, is yet to come.

Nick Bidwell

Fyodor SMOLOV

Age 27, Krasnodar & Russia

New Entry Rumoured to be attracting plenty of interest from clubs in England, France and Germany, the Krasnodar striker is far and away the most clinical finisher in Russian football at the moment, topping the domestic scoring charts last season with 20 goals and continuing in the same rich vein of form throughout in the current campaign.

He does not, however, solely concentrate on the end-product. Thanks to his background as a winger, he can also dribble and work the channels to make chances for his team-mates. And as an added bonus, he never shirks his defensive responsibilities, either.

His career so far has been a strange mixture of highs and lows. On breaking into the Dynamo Moscow side at the age of 18, in the autumn of 2008, he was initially lauded as a teenage sensation but was unable to live up to the hype. Struggling to hold down a regular starting place he ended up becoming a serial loanee, but generally failed to impress during temporary postings in Holland, with Feyenoord, and with Russian outfit Anzhi.

In those days, he was a difficult character to fathom. At times, he could look tremendous, such as when shining for the Russian under-21 side and then marking his senior international debut with a goal in a friendly with the United States in November 2012. Then on other occasions, mainly in club football, he would appear to offer precious little.

Decried in the media for being more interested in his Miss Russia girlfriend and living a celebrity lifestyle, to many it looked as though he was in real danger of throwing his football career away. But then in 2014, following a loan switch to struggling top-flight side Ural, he finally began to get his sporting act together, thriving as the main striker in coach Aleksandr Tarkhanov's adventurous 4-3-3 formation and making a habit of scoring against the country's top sides.

Against all the odds, Ural managed to dodge the relegation bullet and survive in the top flight, and in the reborn Smolov the club had discovered a new hero.

With his star back in the ascendancy, he was promptly snapped up in the summer of 2015 by the ambitious Krasnodar, where after a shaky start to the season playing out on the left-wing, a mid-term switch to centre-forward brought goals galore as he hit 14 in the post winter-break period, (including 13 in the last eight games). His reward was the player of the season award and a starting role for the national side at Euro 2016.

As a rule of thumb, Russian players do not tend to be successful exports. Smolov may just be an exception.

Nick Bidwell

Sokratis PAPASTATHOPOULOS

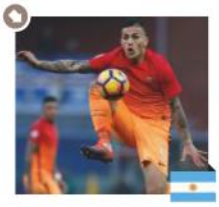
Age 28, Borussia Dortmund (Ger) & Greece

Stalwart for club and country, and a critic of UEFA for forcing Dortmund to play after the attack on the team bus in April.

Esteban PAREDES

Age 36, Colo Colo & Chile

New Entry Left-footed centre-forward who remains the most decisive player in Chilean football and who recently made a triumphant return to the national team.



Leandro PAREDES

Age 22, Roma (Ita) & Argentina

Former Boca starlet who has become a regular at Roma after impressing on loan at Empoli last season. Linked with a summer transfer to England.

PAULINHO

Age 28, Guangzhou Evergrande (Chn) & Brazil

New Entry Outstanding performer in the Chinese Super League, earning a recall to the Brazilian national side.

Cristian PAVON

Age 21, Boca Juniors & Argentina

New Entry Arguably the best young player in Argentina, he is a speedy striker who is more than likely to move to Europe this summer.

Dimitri PAYET

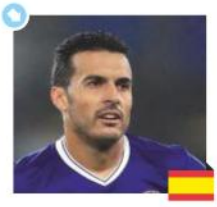
Age 30, Marseille & France

Back in the French league after a spectacular falling out with West Ham. Free-kick specialist who was one of the leading performers for France at Euro 2016.

Michal PAZDAN

Age 29, Legia Warsaw & Poland

New Entry A cult hero for the Polish national side having spent his whole career in the Polish league. Uncompromising centre-back or defensive midfielder, nicknamed "Piranha".



PEDRO

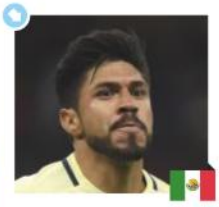
Age 29, Chelsea (Eng) & Spain

New Entry Winner of everything at Barcelona, including six trophies in one season, and famed for scoring in all competitions. Not first choice at Chelsea.

PEPE

Age 34, Real Madrid (Spa) & Portugal

Powerful Brazil-born centre-back whose cynical gamesmanship often detracts from his excellent footballing qualities. In discussions to stay at Real Madrid for another season.



Oribe PERALTA

Age 33, America & Mexico

New Entry Olympic gold medal winner in 2012 as an overage player. Has spent his whole career in the Mexican Liga MX where he has been a consistent top scorer.

Ivan PERISIC

Age 28, Internazionale (Ita) & Croatia

Lively attacker enjoying life in Italy after the switch from Germany in 2015. A regular starter for Croatia. Linked with a move to Man United.

Diego PEROTTI

Age 28, Roma (Ita) & Argentina

Clever but temperamental winger or playmaker who joined Roma permanently in 2016 from Genoa after a successful loan spell.

Loic PERRIN

Age 31, Saint-Etienne & France

The 31-year-old Saint-Etienne captain has been a rock at the back for many seasons now and has even chipped in with four goals this season. Can also play as a defensive midfielder.

Andrea PETAGNA

Age 21, Atalanta & Italy

New Entry Tall centre-forward and former Milan trainee who has impressed during Atalanta's rise up the Serie A table this season, earning a senior Italy cap.

Orbelin PINEDA

Age 21, Guadalajara & Mexico

New Entry Clever technical midfielder who is already a senior international with Mexico. Scorer of the winning penalty as Chivas won the 2017 Clausura title.

Gerard PIQUE

Age 30, Barcelona & Spain

One-time Manchester United trainee widely seen as one of the world's top defenders. Eloquent off the pitch, he has been tipped to pursue a political career when he retires.

Lukasz PISZCZEK

Age 31, Borussia Dortmund (Ger) & Poland

New Entry Former striker, long since established as a swashbuckling right-back. Impressive again for Dortmund this season.

Guido PIZARRO

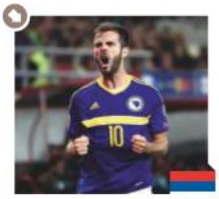
Age 27, Tigres (Mex) & Argentina

Defensive midfielder, nicknamed "*Conde*" (the Count). A naturalised Mexican citizen but he recently made his Argentina debut.

PIZZI

Age 27, Benfica & Portugal

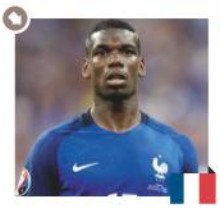
New Entry Midfielder whose work often goes unrecognised alongside more glamorous team-mates. Now established at Benfica after loans at Deportivo and Espanyol.



Miralem PJANIC

Age 27, Juventus (Ita) & Bosnia

Playmaker capped by Luxembourg at youth level after settling there following the Yugoslav war. Has taken on a deeper role since a summer 2016 move to Juventus.



Paul POGBA

Age 24, Manchester United (Eng) & France

The world's most expensive footballer and one of the most complete: dynamic, skilful and tough. Has taken time to settle at United this season.

Diego POLENTA

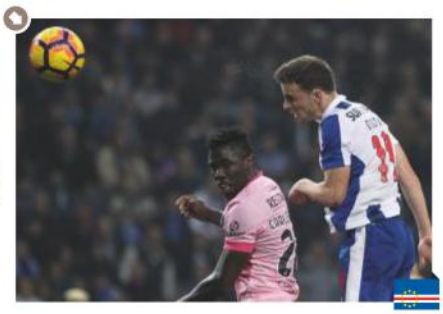
Age 25, Nacional & Uruguay

Classy, left-footed centre-back with the talent to have done more in the game. Developed in Italy but moved back to Uruguay in 2014 as the consequence of battling a weight problem.

Dmitry POLOZ

Age 25, Rostov & Russia

New Entry Quick winger or second striker who has been a key part of Rostov's success in recent seasons. A trainee at Lokomotiv Moscow but did not feature.



Carlos PONCK

Age 22, Pacos Ferreira (Por) & Cape Verde

New Entry Centre-back who has excelled for Chaves in their recent rise in Portugal. Recently made his international debut for Cape Verde Islands.

Ivelin POPOV

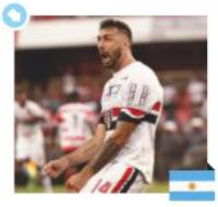
Age 29, Spartak Moscow (Rus) & Bulgaria

New Entry All-rounder who was in fine form for Spartak as they won their first title for 16 years. A Bulgarian national team stalwart.

Alejandro POZUELO

Age 25, Genk (Blg) & Spain

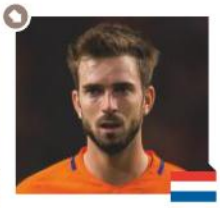
New Entry Former Swansea City man who is thriving in Belgium for Genk, prompting speculation of a big move this summer.



Lucas PRATTO

Age 28, Sao Paulo (Bra) & Argentina

Current Argentina centre-forward who has just swapped Atletico Mineiro for Sao Paulo, where he will spearhead Rogerio Ceni's bold new side.



Davy PROPPER

Age 25, PSV & Holland

New Entry Midfield all-rounder, a grafter and a passer who scores spectacular goals. Joined from Vitesse.

PROFILED **CHRISTIAN PULISIC** ON PAGE 57

Ricardo QUARESMA

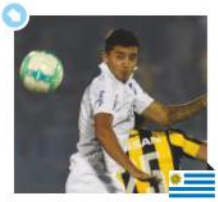
Age 33, Besiktas (Tur) & Portugal

New Entry Veteran winger who is enjoying a renaissance in Turkey, having won the European Championship with Portugal last year.

Ivan RAKITIC

Age 29, Barcelona (Spa) & Croatia

One of Barcelona's most consistent performers under Luis Enrique. Has extended his Barca contract until 2021 with a €125m buyout clause.



Kevin RAMIREZ

Age 23, Nacional & Uruguay

New Entry Sleek, left-footed winger who can also play as a central striker and carries a consistent threat to opponents on the counter-attack.

Sergio RAMOS

Age 31, Real Madrid & Spain

Captain of Real Madrid in his 12th season at the club, with 142 caps for Spain. Centre-back who can also play as an attacking right-back. Collects red cards but also scores crucial goals

Bart RAMSELAAR

Age 20, PSV & Holland

New Entry Youngster who has enjoyed an excellent first season at PSV following a summer 2016 transfer from Utrecht.

PROFILED **MARCUS RASHFORD** ON PAGE 58

Pepe REINA

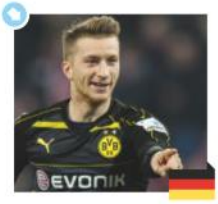
Age 34, Napoli (Ita) & Spain

Former Liverpool no 1 who is now Napoli's first-choice after a brief spell at Bayern as Neuer's understudy.

RENATO AUGUSTO

Age 29, Beijing Guoan (Chn) & Brazil

New Entry Experienced midfielder and a key figure for the Brazil national side despite a move to China from Corinthians last year.



Marco REUS

Age 27, Borussia Dortmund & Germany

Thriving with more responsibility at Dortmund, helping to guide the emerging youngsters such as Ousmane Dembele and Christian Pulisic.

Diego REYES

Age 24, Porto (Por) & Mexico

Centre-back who is thriving in Spain (Sociedad, now Espanyol), on loan from Porto. Old beyond his years, he made his senior Mexico debut at 18.

Franck RIBERY

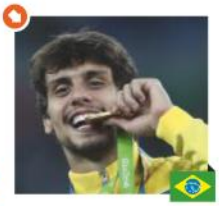
Age 34, Bayern Munich (Ger) & France

New Entry Former France winger who is about to complete his 10th season at Bayern and still plays a key role. Has extended his contract until 2018.

Arjen ROBBEN

Age 33, Bayern Munich (Ger) & Holland

"Reliant" Robben continues to be the man for the big occasion, often dragging Bayern through games with special pieces of skill.



RODRIGO CAIO

Age 23, Sao Paulo & Brazil

Calm and classy centre-back or defensive midfielder and a recent addition to the national squad. Medical problems have delayed a move to Europe.

Niklas SULE

Age 21, Bayern Munich & Germany

New Entry Halfway through the season, such had been the impressive nature of the Hoffenheim centre-back's performances that Bayern Munich wrapped up a €20million deal that will see the outstanding youngster move to Bavarian capital this summer.

Fearless and obdurate in his defensive work, he is also clearly unfazed by the massive challenge that lies ahead of him with the perennial German champions.

With *Nationalmanschaft* stars Mats Hummels and Jerome Boateng the club's first-choice central defensive pairing, he knows only too well that he is unlikely to be an automatic starter any time soon at Bayern. Yet he still jumped at the chance of a switch to the Allianz Arena, making the calculation that sooner or later he, as heir apparent, will have his day.

Bayern were not the only big club in the hunt for the giant stopper, with Chelsea among those who were also rumoured to be extremely keen. But as for most German players, the lure of Bayern was simply irresistible.

"I was just more comfortable with the idea of staying in the Bundesliga," explains the Hoffenheim youth-system graduate. "And in this country, Bayern is the top address. There's no bigger club in the world.

"I think I can learn an unbelievable amount from being in the same squad as Mats and Jerome. I'm sure working with them every day will take my game onto a whole new level.

"I want to profit from this opportunity and eventually establish myself. "

Born and raised in Frankfurt, although part Hungarian on his father's side, Sule has a particular affection for future team-mate Boateng. While laid low in 2014 by a cruciate ligament injury, the youngster was surprised to receive a supportive social media message from the Bayern defender and says that he has never forgotten those words of encouragement, admitting: "For him to write to me, helped give me the strength to recover."

A Germany age-group international since he was 15, and a regular in the Hoffenheim first team for the last four years, he has made stunning progress during this season and was much to the fore as the German Olympic team claimed silver at the Rio Games.

He earned his first senior international cap for Germany in a friendly against Finland in August last year and played a vital role in Hoffenheim's amazing bolt-from-the-blue transformation from relegation candidates to Champions League participants.

Having agreed a five-year deal with the Munich giants, things look as though they can only get better and better.

Nick Bidwell

Garry RODRIGUES

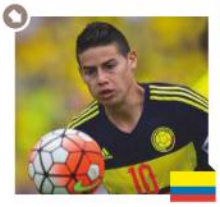
Age 26, Galatasaray (Tur) & Cape Verde

New Entry Dutch-born winger who has enjoyed a varied career – has already played in Holland, Bulgaria, Spain and Greece – and has impressed in Turkey since a January 2017 move.

Cristian RODRIGUEZ

Age 31, Penarol & Uruguay

New Entry Stocky left-footed attacking midfielder now back where he started after a decade in Europe followed by spells in Brazil and Argentina. Approaching 100 international caps.



James RODRIGUEZ

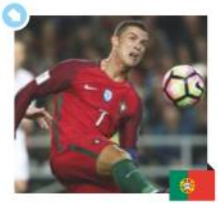
Age 25, Real Madrid (Spa) & Colombia

Star of the 2014 World Cup who fell out of favour with Rafa Benitez and has yet to fully convince Zinedine Zidane that he should be a regular starter.

Alessio ROMAGNOLI

Age 22, Milan (Ita) & Italy

New Entry Highly-rated young defender who cost Milan €25m from Roma in 2015. Has a long-term future as an Italian national team stalwart.



Cristiano RONALDO

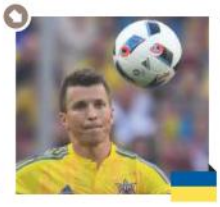
Age 32, Real Madrid (Spa) & Portugal

Continues to defy his critics with spectacular goals. Playing in a central role this season has conserved his energy, probably prolonging his career.

Danny ROSE

Age 26, Tottenham Hotspur & England

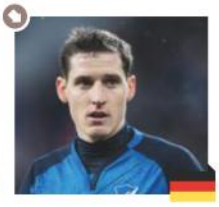
New Entry Arguably the best left-back in the Premier League. Signed from Leeds as a teenager and loaned out to four different clubs by Spurs.



Ruslan ROTAN

Age 35, Dnipro & Ukraine

New Entry Combative Ukraine captain who has been back at Dnipro, his home town club, for almost a decade following a spell at Dynamo Kiev.



Sebastian RUDY

Age 27, Hoffenheim & Germany

New Entry Captain of Hoffenheim who will join Bayern this summer on a free. Can play in a number of midfield positions, as well as right-back.

TALISCA

Age 23, Besiktas (Tur) & Brazil

New Entry Coming to the halfway point in his two-year loan at Besiktas from Benfica, the attacking midfielder has certainly been in show-stopping mode for the "Black Eagles" of Istanbul, sending the Vodafone Arena faithful wild with his lethal finishing, expressive left foot, long-striding surges and free-kick wizardry.

In a sure sign of possessing a big-match temperament, he has saved some of his best performances this term for continental competition. On target with a stupendous free-kick in a 1-1 Champions League draw with Benfica in September, he has frequently dazzled as Besiktas reached the last eight of the Europa League, notably scoring twice in the second leg of their quarter-final against Lyon.

During his two years at Benfica – who bought him in a €4million deal from Bahia in 2014 – he turned out to be a classic riddle encased in an enigma. Full of goalscoring beans in his opening six months at the Estadio da Luz he mysteriously lost his bearings, dropping out of the first-team picture and only making headlines for extra-mural scrapes, which included an unauthorised appearance in a futsal tournament and a close encounter with the judiciary for riding a motorbike without a licence.

What the long-term future holds for the beanpole front man is unclear. He insists he will not return to Benfica, accusing the club's directors of bad faith, and while Besiktas have an option to buy they claim the €25m asking price is beyond their means.

"He's a diamond," says Besiktas chairman Fikret Orman. "He's adapted really well and we've enjoyed having him here.

"We'd like him to stay, but don't have that sort of money. However good the player."

Sources in Italy suggest Lazio are interested. So might be Manchester United, whose manager Jose Mourinho has admired him for a long time – and the pair have the same agent, super emissary Jorge Mendes.

Although the player has yet to win full representative honours for Brazil, he did make the squad in November 2014 for a friendly double-header against Turkey and Austria.

Earlier this year, he founded his own football club in Bahia. Esporte Clube Olimpia is principally an under-15 and under-17 set-up with the aim, according to Talisca, to develop "athletes and citizens".

Nick Bidwell

Daniele RUGANI

Age 22, Juventus & Italy

New Entry Young centre-back who is seen as a future first-choice for both club and country. Capped by Italy at all levels from Under-17 upwards.

RUI PATRICIO

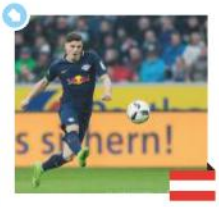
Age 29, Sporting & Portugal

Outstanding for Portugal when they won Euro 2016, saving a penalty in the quarter-final shoot-out. First-teamer at Sporting for more than a decade.

Victor RUIZ

Age 28, Villarreal & Spain

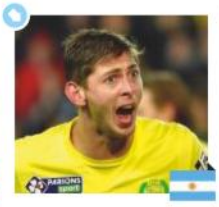
Former under-21 centre-back who has excelled for Villarreal in recent seasons as they have sought to re-establish themselves in the Spanish top flight.



Marcel SABITZER

Age 23, RB Leipzig (Ger) & Austria

New Entry Young forward who has played his part in RB Leipzig's surprise success this season and become a regular for Austria.



Emiliano SALA

Age 26, Nantes (Fra) & Argentina

New Entry The Argentinian number nine has been in fine form this season, with nine goals helping Nantes into mid-table in Ligue 1.

Mohamed SALAH

Age 24, Roma (Ita) & Egypt

Livewire Egyptian attacker who has overcome the setback of being frozen out by Chelsea to thrive in Serie A. Starred for Egypt in the 2017 African Nations Cup.

Aleksandr SAMEDOV

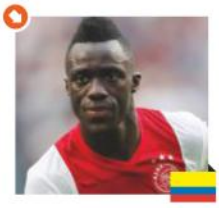
Age 32, Spartak Moscow & Russia

New Entry Right winger who rejoined Spartak from Lokomotiv in January to strengthen their title challenge.

Alexis SANCHEZ

Age 28, Arsenal (Eng) & Chile

The former Udinese and Barca attacker has been one of the stronger performers in a disappointing year for Arsenal, who will face pressure to keep him this summer.



Davinson SANCHEZ

Age 20, Ajax (Hol) & Colombia

New Entry Centre-back who has enjoyed an exceptional first season in Amsterdam, where he moved after winning the 2016 Libertadores Cup with Atletico Nacional.

Jose SAND

Age 36, Lanus & Argentina

New Entry Veteran striker who is back at Lanus and continuing to score goals. Was the top scorer in the Argentinian championship last season.

Leroy SANE

Age 21, Manchester City (Eng) & Germany

Exciting attacking talent who has already made a successful transition from the Bundesliga to the Premier League after his £46m move from Schalke.

Morgan SANSON

Age 22, Marseille & France

New Entry After moving from Montpellier in January, he has had an instant impact on the team, chipping in with a league-leading nine assists.

SAUL Niguez

Age 22, Atletico Madrid & Spain

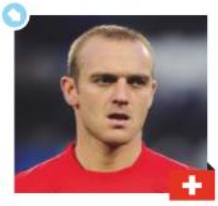
Highly prized starlet who can play in a number of different midfield positions. Has enjoyed his most productive season yet at Atletico.

Jefferson SAVARINO

Age 20, Real Salt Lake (USA) & Venezuela

New Entry Signed on a season-long loan from Zulia in May.

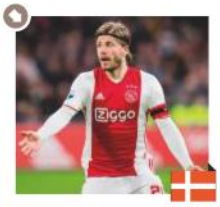
PROFILED PATRIK SCHICK ON PAGE 61



Marco SCHNEUWLY

Age 32, Lucerne & Switzerland

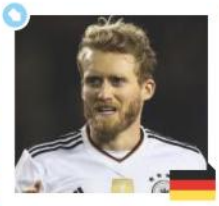
New Entry Veteran centre-forward, formerly of Young Boys and Thun, who is enjoying the best season of his career.



Lasse SCHONE

Age 30, Ajax (Hol) & Denmark

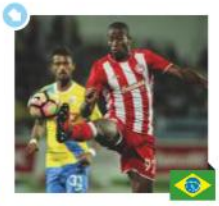
New Entry Danish stalwart and set-piece expert in his fifth season at Ajax. A veteran of the Dutch League, having also played for De Graafschap and NEC.



Andre SCHURRLE

Age 26, Borussia Dortmund & Germany

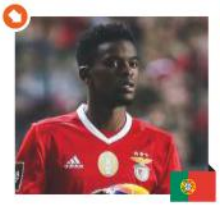
Member of Germany's 2014 World Cup-winning squad who joined Dortmund from Wolfsburg for a club record €30m last summer.



SEBA

Age 24, Olympiakos (Gre) & Brazil

New Entry Attacker who has become central to Olympiakos over the past two seasons. Previously played with Estoril in Portugal.



Nelson SEMEDO

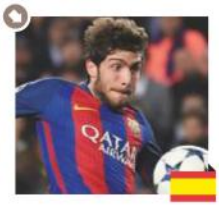
Age 23, Benfica & Portugal

New Entry Right-back who is on the radar of a number of leading Premier League clubs. Came through the youth system at third-tier Sintrense.

Igor SERGEEV

Age 24, Pakhtakor Tashkent & Uzbekistan

New Entry Centre-forward who has spear-headed Uzbekistan's World Cup qualifying bid. Spent last year on loan at Beijing Guoan.



SERGI Roberto

Age 25, Barcelona & Spain

Barcelona academy product whose versatility has proved invaluable. Endeared himself to fans with the last-minute winner against PSG in the Champions League.

Jean SERI

Age 25, Nice (Fra) & Ivory Coast

New Entry In his second season in France, the Ivorian has attracted wealthy overseas suitors with goals and assists from central midfield.

Xherdan SHAQIRI

Age 25, Stoke City (Eng) & Switzerland

Clever attacker whose signing was a coup for Stoke but he has yet to set the Premier League alight in a mid-table side. Key man for Switzerland.

Gylfi SIGURDSSON

Age 27, Swansea City (Eng) & Iceland

Set-piece specialist and Iceland's main source of creativity. His Premier League future is in doubt as Swansea battle against the drop.

David SILVA

Age 31, Manchester City (Eng) & Spain

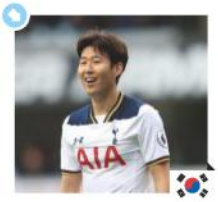
The brains behind Man City's best attacking moves and increasingly important to Spain in the post-Xavi era. Born in the Canary Islands and came through Valencia's youth system.

Martin SKRTEL

Age 32, Fenerbahce (Tur) & Slovakia

Tough-looking but injury-prone centre-half. Captain of Slovakia.

PROFILED **FYODOR SMOLOV** ON PAGE 62



SON Heung-min

Age 24, Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) & South Korea

New Entry Most successful South Korean player in Europe. Took time to settle in England.

Yeferson SOTELDO

Age 19, Huachipato (Chl) & Venezuela

New Entry Talented but raw playmaker who is interesting Argentinian side River Plate. Will be one to watch in Under-20 World Cup.

Leonardo SPINAZZOLA

Age 24, Juventus & Italy

New Entry Left-back or midfielder on loan at Atalanta from Juventus and starred in their Serie A rise. Made his senior Italy debut in March.

Raheem STERLING

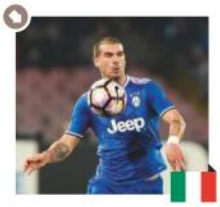
Age 22, Manchester City & England

Pacy, gifted Jamaican-born attacker who cost City £49m from Liverpool in summer 2015 after a lengthy contract dispute with the Anfield club.

Lars STINDL

Age 28, Borussia Monchengladbach & Germany

Monchengladbach captain who has been in sensational goalscoring form for his club this season, moving onto the radar of Germany coach Joachim Low.



Stefano STURARO

Age 24, Juventus & Italy

Italian under-21 cap who is fast maturing into an important figure in the Juventus midfield, thanks to his versatility and work-rate. Joined from Genoa in 2015.

Luis SUAREZ

Age 30, Barcelona (Spa) & Uruguay

Bounced back from his 2014 global ban to win the 2016 ESM Golden Shoe as Europe's top scorer. Has extended his Barca contract to 2021.

Danijel SUBASIC

Age 32, Monaco (Fra) & Croatia

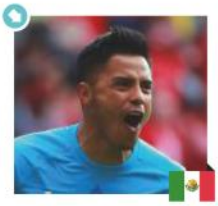
New Entry Monaco have the best defence in Ligue 1 and it's partly thanks to their Croatian keeper, who has been imperious between the sticks.

Jonathan TAH

Age 21, Bayer Leverkusen & Germany

One of the most promising defensive talents in Germany. Already a full cap.

PROFILED **NIKLAS SULE** ON PAGE 64



Alfredo TALAVERA

Age 34, Toluca & Mexico

New Entry Mexico's first-choice keeper in the 2018 World Cup qualifying games. At Toluca since 2009.

Percy TAU

Age 22, Mamelodi Sundowns & South Africa

New Entry Starred for Sundowns when they won the African Champions League in 2016.

PROFILED **TALISCA** ON PAGE 66

Julio TAVARES

Age 28, Dijon (Fra) & Cape Verde

New Entry One of the rare players from Cape Verde in the French league, Tavares is Dijon's top scorer with nine goals so far this campaign.

TCHE TCHE

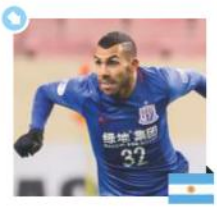
Age 24, Palmeiras & Brazil

New Entry Made a big breakthrough last year. Signed for the national championship, he was the central artery of the champions' midfield, versatile, dynamic and safe in possession.

Marc-Andre TER STEGEN

Age 25, Barcelona (Spa) & Germany

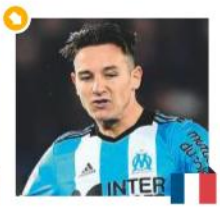
Now established as Barca's first-choice keeper after Claudio Bravo's move to Manchester City last summer. Was a member of Germany's Euro 2016 squad.



Carlos TEVEZ

Age 33, Shanghai Shenhua (Chn) & Argentina

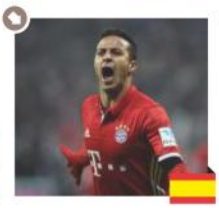
Rumoured to be the world's highest-paid player, on £615,00 a week in China, following his move from Boca but he has disputed the reports.



Florian THAUVIN

Age 24, Marseille & France

New Entry The mercurial winger has shown greater consistency this season, and earned his first call-up to Didier Deschamps' national squad.



THIAGO Alcantara

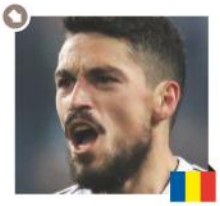
Age 26, Bayern Munich (Ger) & Spain

Gifted midfielder who has been outstanding for Bayern in the Bundesliga after a terrible run of injuries. Son of former Brazil international Mazinho.

THIAGO MAIA

Age 20, Santos & Brazil

New Entry Left-footed central midfielder, part of Brazil's Olympic squad, who has already, and probably prematurely, been linked to major European clubs.



Nicolae STANCIU

Age 24, Anderlecht (Blg) & Romania

New Entry Attacking midfielder who has made an excellent transition to the Belgian league since a summer 2016 transfer from Steaua.

Marek SUCHY

Age 29, Basle (Swi) & Czech Republic

New Entry An experienced defender, a key man for club and country, who had four seasons in Russia before moving to Switzerland.

Lukasz TEODORCZYK

Age 25, Anderlecht (Blg) & Poland

New Entry In-form and in-demand striker who recently made his loan from Dynamo Kiev to Anderlecht permanent.

THIAGO SILVA

Age 32, Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) & Brazil

One of the world's leading defenders who is back in favour with Brazil despite being part of the PSG defence that let in six goals to Barcelona.

Youri TIELEMANS

Age 20, Anderlecht & Belgium

Officially, Anderlecht are skippered by the Algerian playmaker Sofiane Hanni. However, in practice, the man in the driving seat at Parc Astrid is a central midfielder Youri Tielemans, who is an enthralling fusion of authority and top-drawer footballing class.

In his element in a box-to-box role, the Belgian international – who won his first senior cap earlier this term against Holland – has few, if any, weaknesses. Not only does he play with drive, physicality and athleticism, he also passes the ball intelligently. As an added bonus, he packs a rocket of a shot in either foot – as he proved it with two long-range thunderbolts in two minutes in a 4-1 victory against Oostende in February, first with the right boot, then the left.

Anderlecht are the only club Tielemans has ever known, joining *Les Mauves* at the tender age of five. He was sufficiently talented to be inducted into the first team at 16, in July 2013, and just three months later he would become the third youngest player in Champions League history at 16 years and 148 days. In both 2014 and 2015 he was voted Belgium's most promising youngster.

"Tielemans has to be worth €100 million," gushed former Anderlecht and Holland striker turned ever-controversial pundit Jan Mulder.

"You should put that in writing and get it authenticated at a good lawyer. I'd compare him to Enzo Scifo [the all-time great Belgian number 10]. They have the same Latin touch, the same ability to strike a ball and to hit precise long passes. He's a good kid as well."

The smart money says this will be the youngster's last season playing club football in his homeland. Valued by his employers in the €20-25m bracket, he is being tracked by a host of leading European sides and Belgium under-21 coach Johan Walem recently revealed that Chelsea boss Antonio Conte had asked about him.

"I would advise him to stay here for another year, but that's a big ask," says legendary former Anderlecht forward and coach Paul Van Himst.

"Youri has all the necessary qualities to play for a big European club.

"I don't see him at a mid-table side in a major championship. He should be aiming higher."

Nick Bidwell

Denis ZAKARIA

Age 20, Young Boys & Switzerland

New Entry The biblical expression that "no one is a prophet in their own land" very much rings true in the case of the Swiss midfield starlet, who after struggling to nail down a regular spot at Servette has truly blossomed since leaving for Young Boys of Bern in the summer of 2015.

While his coach at Servette, Kevin Cooper, did not particularly rate him, YB boss Adi Hutter saw masses of untapped potential and was willing to take a risk on the youngster. Ultimately he would be proved right, as Zakaria went on to take the top-flight by storm, earn a spot in Switzerland's Euro 2016 squad and voted the best youngster in the country.

Alternately using him as a striker, midfielder or even a central defender, Servette never seemed to know his best position. But, crucially, he only has to worry about one role with his Berne-based club – that of the all-action, engine-room warrior. Tall, forceful and dynamic, he is also strong on the ball.

"He has that rare ability to make lightning-quick transitions, turning defence into attack," declares Switzerland under-21 coach Heinz Moser. "I know some people claim he plays like Pogba. There is something in that, but he reminds me more of Patrick Vieira."

Just two years ago, the Geneva native was scratching a living in the fifth tier of the Swiss pyramid with the Servette under-21 side. Now he has the world at his feet and is rumoured to be on the cusp of a €10million switch to the Premier League or Bundesliga.

Not bad for a player who only cost YB 200,000 Swiss francs (€185,000).

"It's all happened so quickly for me," says Zakaria, who is the son of a Congolese father and a mother from Sudan. "It's a dream to have established myself in the Super League and to have made the national team.

"My transfer to YB was the perfect move for me. They had been watching me for a while and in Berne, I found a great club, good directors and super team.

"Adi Hutter straight away put his faith in me and his aggressive attacking football suits me. I've a lot to thank him for."

Nick Bidwell

Vincent THILL

Age 17, Metz (Fra) & Luxembourg

New Entry First player born in 2000 to play in one of the five big European leagues.

PROFILED YOURI TIELEMANS ON PAGE 69

Corentin TOLISSO

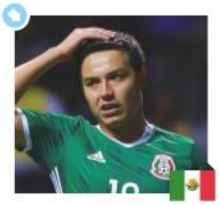
Age 22, Lyon & France

New Entry Among the best midfielders in France for a couple of seasons now. Juventus are said to have bid £30m.

Jens TOORNSTRA

Age 28, Feyenoord & Holland

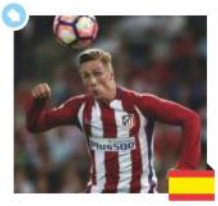
New Entry Hard running attacking midfielder who has been one of the key figures in Feyenoord's title challenge. Joined the club from Utrecht in 2014.



Erick TORRES

Age 24, Houston Dynamo (USA) & Mexico

Talented goalscorer who is enjoying life at Houston again under new coach Wilmer Cabrera. Nickname "*El Cubo*" (the cube) refers to the shape of his head.



Fernando TORRES

Age 33, Atletico Madrid & Spain

New Entry Still playing an important role for Atletico, albeit as a sub. In terms of trophies won, one of the most successful players of recent times.

Macnelly TORRES

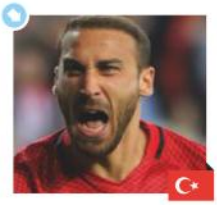
Age 32, Atletico Nacional & Colombia

New Entry Has an eye for a pass and made a triumphant return to form last year as he helped Atletico to win the Libertadores Cup.

Oliver TORRES

Age 22, Porto (Por) & Spain

New Entry Former Atletico starlet and Spanish Under-21 international who Porto will pay Atletico €20m to sign permanently this summer. Often known simply as Oliver.



Cenk TOSUN

Age 25, Besiktas & Turkey

New Entry Striker who is enjoying his best season in the Turkish league this year. Born in Germany and made one appearance for the German Under-21s.

Francesco TOTTI

Age 40, Roma & Italy

Veteran forward and Roma icon who has kept Italian football watchers on tenterhooks over his retirement. Roma say he is going, but he has not yet confirmed the departure.

Bertrand TRAORE

Age 21, Chelsea (Eng) & Burkina Faso

New Entry One of Chelsea's legion of loanees, enjoying scoring success at Vitesse and now Ajax but unlikely to play for Chelsea again.

Miguel TRAUCO

Age 24, Flamengo (Bra) & Peru

New Entry Peru's first choice left-back enjoyed a splendid 2016 at Universitario of Lima, then moved south to Brazil, where he has made an impressive start.

Samuel UMTITI

Age 23, Barcelona (Spa) & France

New Entry Centre-back who has enjoyed a meteoric rise over the past year, playing for France at the Euros and moving from Lyon to Barca.

Enes UNAL

Age 19, Manchester City (Eng) & Turkey

New Entry Teenager thriving in Holland, on loan at Twente from Manchester City, after being snapped up by City in 2015. Already a full international for Turkey.

Borja VALERO

Age 32, Fiorentina (Ita) & Spain

New Entry Veteran playmaker who has been at the heart of Fiorentina's midfield for the past five seasons. Capped only once by Spain.

Jesus VALLEJO

Age 20, Real Madrid & Spain

New Entry Spanish Under-21 defender who has earned rave reviews while on loan from Real Madrid to Eintracht Frankfurt. Could return to Spain this summer.

Marco VAN GINKEL

Age 24, Chelsea (Eng) & Holland

New Entry Another Chelsea loanee who recently extended his stay at PSV after spells at Milan and Stoke City. Capped by Holland aged 19.

Raphael VARANE

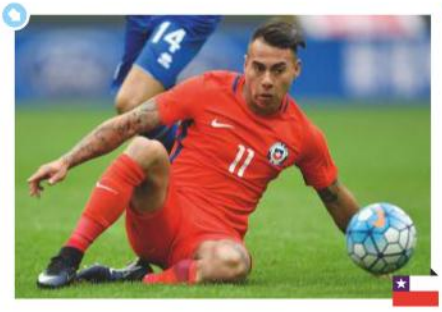
Age 24, Real Madrid (Spa) & France

Elegant, speedy centre-back who has become increasingly important to Real Madrid but missed Euro 2016 with a thigh injury.

Jamie VARDY

Age 30, Leicester City & England

Direct and pacy, he was playing non-league until five years ago. Now an England regular but he rejected Arsenal's overtures last summer.



Eduardo VARGAS

Age 27, Tigres (Mex) & Chile

New Entry Striker who burst onto the scene with Universidad de Chile but has yet to recapture that success. Recently moved to Mexico from Germany.

Carlos VELA

Age 28, Real Sociedad (Spa) & Mexico

One of Mexico's most experienced players. Controversially signed by Arsenal in 2006 while aged under 18, breaking FIFA regulations.

Simone VERDI

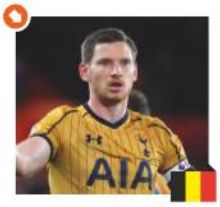
Age 24, Bologna & Italy

New Entry Once tipped as the next Zola, the versatile attacker is enjoying his first season at Bologna and made his senior Italy debut in March.

Marco VERRATTI

Age 24, Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) & Italy

Deep-lying playmaker midfielder who has been an influential figure at PSG since an €11m move from Italy's Pescara as a teenager. Will be the subject of much transfer speculation this summer.



Jan VERTONGHEN

Age 30, Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) & Belgium

Elegant but injury-prone centre-back who has played a crucial role in Spurs' transformation into title contenders.

Arturo VIDAL

Age 29, Bayern Munich (Ger) & Chile

New Entry Ultra-competitive "warrior" who is thriving again in Germany after a difficult first season in Munich following a 2015 move from Juventus. Key figure in Chile's recent triumphs.

Tonny VILHENA

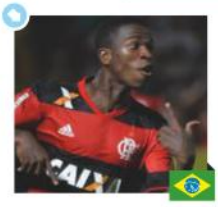
Age 22, Feyenoord & Holland

New Entry Youth product who has played a major part in Feyenoord's title challenge this season. Almost left the club last summer over a contract dispute.

David VILLA

Age 35, New York City (USA) & Spain

Former Spain striker who has been one of the more successful veteran signings by MLS. Recently agreed to another year at New York City.



VINICIUS JUNIOR

Age 16, Flamengo & Brazil

New Entry The latest Brazilian to be saddled with the "wonderkid" label after his spectacular form in the South American Under-17 Championships.

VITOLO

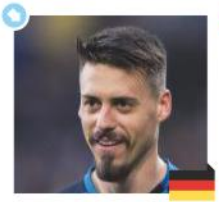
Age 27, Sevilla & Spain

New Entry Dynamic performer who plays on the right despite being left-footed and is enjoying his best season for Sevilla. Signed from Las Palmas in 2013.

Ruud VORMER

Age 28, Club Brugge (Blg) & Holland

New Entry Dutchman who has become one of the top midfield operators in the Belgian league and could move on to wealthier pastures this summer.



Sandro WAGNER

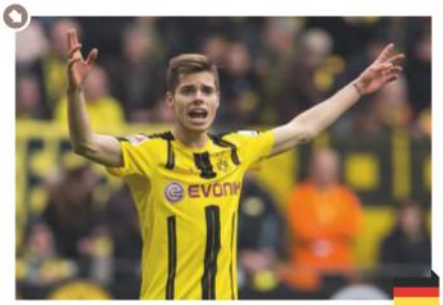
Age 29, Hoffenheim & Germany

New Entry Former Bayern trainee who is enjoying a productive campaign at Hoffenheim after his goals helped Darmstadt stay up in 2016.

Kyle WALKER

Age 26, Tottenham Hotspur & England

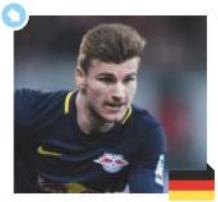
New Entry Right-back who has excellent attacking skills but his fitness levels have been questioned by Spurs manager Pochettino.



Julian WEIGL

Age 21, Borussia Dortmund & Germany

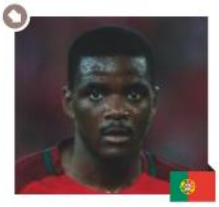
Defensive midfielder who has been one of the brightest domestic talents to emerge from the Bundesliga in recent seasons. Signed from Munich 1860.



Timo WERNER

Age 21, RB Leipzig & Germany

New Entry Prolific centre-forward whose goals in his first season for Leipzig have seen him capped at senior level by Germany. Previously with Stuttgart.



WILLIAM CARVALHO

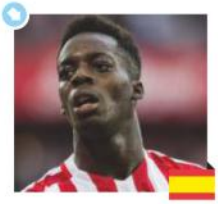
Age 25, Sporting & Portugal

Highly rated, dynamic midfielder contracted to Sporting until 2020. Still in the Portuguese league despite interest from across Europe. A Euro 2016 winner.

WILLIAM POTTKER

Age 23, Ponte Preta & Brazil

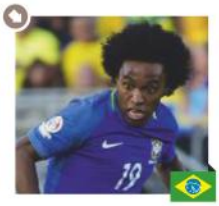
New Entry Exploded on the scene last year as the Brazilian league's joint-top scorer. Strong, left footed striker who some are comparing to Adriano.



Inaki WILLIAMS

Age 22, Athletic Bilbao & Spain

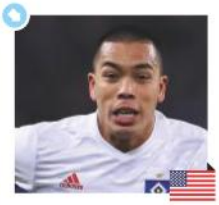
Exciting young forward who was born in Bilbao to a Ghanaian father and a Liberian mother. Agreed a new deal last year that added a €50m buyout clause to deter suitors.



WILLIAN

Age 28, Chelsea (Eng) & Brazil

Hard-running attacking midfielder who has slipped down the Chelsea pecking order under Antonio Conte. A starter in Brazil's World Cup qualifying campaign.



Bobby WOOD

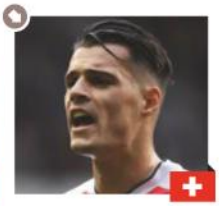
Age 24, Hamburg (Ger) & USA

New Entry Hawaii-born striker who moved to Germany to begin his career at Munich 1860 and has since played his way into the senior USA national side.

WU Lei

Age 25, Shanghai SIPG & China

New Entry Shanghai SIPG's all-time top scorer and youngest person to have played in a professional Chinese football match aged just 14.



Granit XHAKA

Age 24, Arsenal (Eng) & Switzerland

The "little Einstein" has struggled at times in the Premier League but is one of Switzerland's key men. Swiss-born to Kosovan Albanian parents.

Hakim ZIYECH

Age 24, Ajax (Hol) & Morocco

Left behind by the Bosman ruling and football globalisation, Ajax might not be the supreme force they once were, but they have not lost their ability to attract young, go-getting talent.

Just ask playmaker Ziyech, who despite offers from England, Italy and Germany, only had eyes for the Amsterdammers on deciding to leave Twente last summer.

"After speaking to Peter Bosz [the Ajax coach] and having a tour of the stadium, my decision to come to Ajax was made pretty quickly," he told Dutch state broadcaster NOS.

""As far as career choices go, I like to take things step by step and Ajax was the best move for me at this time.

"Ajax are a top club in the Netherlands and here I'll have the chance to win trophies and to develop into a better player."

Taking advantage of Twente's massive financial problems, Ajax were able to snap up the Dutch-born Moroccan international for only €11million and that, by any metric, is a snip.

For at least three seasons now, Ziyech has been the most creative player in the Eredivisie. An outstanding total package of technical virtuosity, vision, intelligent movement and substantial goal threat, his decision-making is excellent, he is agile and lively, and he has a good feel for mixing up the styles, knowing exactly when to play it simple and when to take on and beat a man.

Naturally, the move to Ajax has been something of a culture change for him. More pressure, more competition for places and a wholly different mentality to take on board. Whereas at Twente he was the star of the show, more often than not carrying the team on his own slim shoulders, Ajax are much more collectively-orientated.

This season he has had a whole new script to learn, but whether performing in the Eredeivisie or Europa League all the signs are that he is adjusting well.

Born and raised in the town of Dronten in central Holland, he cut his teeth at local sides Reaal and ASV prior to securing a place at the Heerenveen youth academy. He made his first-team debut for the club at the age of 19 – in a Europa League tie against Rapid Bucharest in August 2012 – and the following season was voted the club's Player of the Year.

Despite winning caps for Holland at under-19, under-20 and under-21 level, in 2015 he opted to play his senior international football for Morocco, the country of his parents.

However, much to the surprise of many Lions of Atlas fans, Morocco coach Herve Renard left him out of his squad for this year's African Nations Cup.

"I know that a selector never stays in place for long, so I'll be patient," responded Ziyech.

Nick Bidwell

Andriy YARMOLENKO

Age 27, Dynamo Kiev & Ukraine

Left-sided attacker dubbed the "new Shevchenko" for his prolific scoring record. Not long into a new five-year contract with Dynamo but has long been tipped to move to the West.

Pablo ZABALETA

Age 32, Manchester City (Eng) & Argentina

Attacking right-back who played for Argentina in the 2014 World Cup Final but is likely to leave Manchester City this summer as Pep Guardiola updates his squad.

Wilfried ZAHA

Age 24, Crystal Palace (Eng) & Ivory Coast

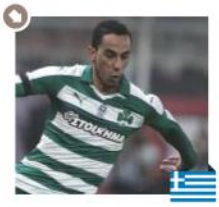
New Entry Ivorian-born winger with pace and tricks. Overlooked by England.

Davide ZAPPACOSTA

Age 24, Torino & Italy

New Entry Highly-regarded right-back who made his senior Italy debut last autumn.

PROFILED DENIS ZAKARIA ON PAGE 70



ZECA

Age 28, Panathinaikos & Greece

New Entry Lisbon-born midfielder who has spent most of his career in Greece. Made his debut for Greece in March after switching nationality.

ZHENG Zhi

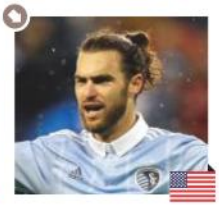
Age 36, Guangzhou Evergrande & China

Veteran national-team captain and star for China's leading side, Guangzhou Evergrande. Back in China after spells at Charlton and Celtic.

Piotr ZIELINSKI

Age 22, Napoli (Ita) & Poland

New Entry Joined Napoli last summer after playing for coach Maurizio Sarri at Empoli. Regarded as a future regular fixture in the Poland national side.



Graham ZUSI

Age 30, Sporting Kansas City & USA

New Entry Experienced midfielder in his ninth season at Kansas City. A regular in USA's 2018 World Cup qualifying campaign.

THE COMPLETE LIST...

Omar ABDULRAHMAN ... Al Ain & UAE
Vincent ABOUBAKAR ... Porto & Cameroon
Marcos ACUNA ... Racing & Argentina
ADRIEN SILVA ... Sporting & Portugal
Aritz ADURIZ ... Athletic Bilbao & Spain
Sergio AGUERO ... Man City & Argentina
Odil AHMEDOV ... Shanghai SIPG & Uzbekistan
David ALABA ... Bayern Munich & Austria
Lucas ALARIO ... River Plate & Argentina
Jordi ALBA ... Barcelona & Spain
Paco ALCACER ... Barcelona & Spain
P34 Toby ALDERWEIRELD ... Tottenham & Belgium
ALEX GRIMALDO ... Benfica & Spain
ALEX TEIXEIRA ... Jiangsu Suning & Brazil
Denis ALIBEC ... Steaua Bucharest & Romania
Ezgjan ALIOSKI ... Lugano & Macedonia
Dele ALLI ... Tottenham & England
Miguel ALMIRON ... Atlanta United & Paraguay
Jozy ALTIDORE ... Toronto & USA
Felipe ANDERSON ... Lazio & Brazil
ANDRE SILVA ... Porto & Portugal
Pedro AQUINO ... Sporting Cristal & Peru
Juan ARANGO ... Zulia & Venezuela
Charles ARANGUIZ ... Leverkusen & Chile
Nestor ARAUJO ... Santos & Mexico
Santiago ASCACIBAR ... Estudiantes & Argentina
Marco ASENSIO ... Real Madrid & Spain
Iago ASPAS ... Celta Vigo & Spain
Pierre-Emerick AUBAMEYANG . Dortmund & Gabon
Serge AURIER ... Paris St Germain & Ivory Coast
Dede AYEW ... West Ham & Ghana
Sardar AZMOUN ... Rostov & Iran
Eric BAILLY ... Manchester Utd & Ivory Coast
Riad BAJIC ... Konyaspor & Bosnia
Cedric BAKAMBU ... Villarreal & DR Congo
Tiemoue BAKAYOKO ... Monaco & France
Keita BALDE ... Lazio & Senegal
P36 Gareth BALE ... Real Madrid & Wales
Mario BALOTELLI ... Nice & Italy
Ever BANEGA ... Inter & Argentina
Ross BARKLEY ... Everton & England
Christian BASSOGOG ... Henan Jianye & Cameroon
Augusto BATALLA ... River Plate & Argentina
Oliver BAUMANN ... Hoffenheim & Germany
Alejandro BEDOYA ... Philadelphia & USA
Hector BELLERIN ... Arsenal & Spain
Andrea BELOTTI ... Torino & Italy P38
Wissam BEN YEDDER ... Sevilla & France
Dario BENEDETTO ... Boca Juniors & Argentina
Martin BENITEZ ... Independiente & Argentina
Nabil BENTALEB ... Schalke & Algeria)
Christian BENTEKE ... Crystal Palace & Belgium
Karim BENZEMA ... Real Madrid & France
Domenico BERARDI ... Sassuolo & Italy
Marcus BERG ... Panathinaikos & Sweden
Valon BERISHA ... Red Bull Salzburg & Kosovo
Federico BERNARDESCHI ... Fiorentina & Italy
BERNARDO SILVA ... Monaco & Portugal
Lucas BIGLIA ... Lazio & Argentina
Khama BILLIAT ... Mamelodi Sundowns & Zimbabwe
Jerome BOATENG ... Bayern Munich & Germany
Christian BOLANOS ... Vancouver Whitecaps & Costa Rica
Miller BOLANOS ... Gremio & Ecuador
P38 Giacomo BONAVENTURA ... Milan & Italy
Leonardo BONUCCI ... Juventus & Italy P40
Miguel BORJA ... Palmeiras & Colombia
Eric BOTTEGHIN ... Feyenoord & Brazil
Gustavo BOU ... Racing & Argentina
Ryad BOUDEBOUZ ... Montpellier & Algeria
Mbark BOUSSOUFA ... Al Jazira & Morocco
Michael BRADLEY ... Toronto & USA
Yacine BRAHIMI ... Porto & Algeria
Martin BRAITHWAITE ... Toulouse & Denmark
Julian BRANDT ... Bayer Leverkusen & Germany
Jimmy BRIAND ... Guingamp & France
BRUMA ... Galatasaray & Portugal
BRUNO Soriano ... Villarreal & Spain
Gigi BUFFON ... Juventus & Italy
P40 Roman BURKI ... Borussia Dortmund & Switzerland
Sergio BUSQUETS ... Barcelona & Spain
Gary CAHILL ... Chelsea & England

Jose CALLEJON ... Napoli & Spain
Ignacio CAMACHO ... Malaga & Spain
Nestor CAMACHO ... Guarani & Paraguay
Emre CAN ... Liverpool & Germany
Antonio CANDREVA ... Internazionale & Italy
CARLITOS ... Sion & Portugal
Yannick Ferreira CARRASCO Atletico Madrid & Belgium
Dani CARVAJAL ... Real Madrid & Spain
CASEMIRO ... Real Madrid & Brazil
P40 Nicolas CASTILLO ... Pumas & Chile
Gonzalo CASTRO ... Dortmund & Germany
Edinson CAVANI ... Paris St Germain & Uruguay
Juan CAZARES ... Atletico Mineiro & Ecuador
Giorgio CHIELLINI ... Juventus & Italy
Alexandru CHIPCIU ... Anderlecht & Romania
Alejandro CHUMACERO ... The Strongest & Bolivia
Pedro CONDE ... PAS Giannina & Spain
Jesus CORONA ... Porto & Mexico
Gabriel CORTEZ ... Independiente del Valle & Ecuador P42
Diego COSTA ... Chelsea & Spain
Thibaut COURTOIS ... Chelsea & Belgium
Philippe COUTINHO ... Liverpool & Brazil
Christian CUEVA ... Sao Paulo & Peru
Wylan CYPRIEN ... Nice & France
Mahmoud DAHOUD ... Gladbach & Germany
Danilo D'AMBROSIO ... Inter & Italy
Jurgen DAMM ... Tigres & Mexico
DANILO Pereira ... Porto & Portugal)
Vladimir DARIDA ... Hertha & Czech Rep
DAVID LUIZ ... Chelsea & Brazil
Giorgian DE ARRESCAETA ... Cruzeiro & Uruguay
P42 Kevin DE BRUYNE ... Manchester City & Belgium
David DE GEA ... Manchester United & Spain
Nicolas DE LA CRUZ ... Liverpool & Uruguay
Daniele DE ROSSI ... Roma & Italy
Thomas DELANEY ... Werder Bremen & Denmark
Matias DELGADO ... Basle & Argentina
Mousa DEMBELE ... Tottenham & Belgium
Moussa DEMBELE ... Celtic & France
Ousmane DEMBELE ... Borussia Dortmund & France
Kerem DEMIRBAY ... Hoffenheim & Germany
Diego DEMME ... Red Bull Leipzig & Germany
Clint DEMPSEY ... Seattle Sounders & USA
Leander DENDONCKER ... Anderlecht & Belgium
Memphis DEPAY ... Lyon & Holland
Angel DI MARIA ... Paris Saint-Germain & Argentina
Mouctar DIAKHABY ... Lyon & France
Marcelo DIAZ ... Celta Vigo & Chile
Famara DIEDHIOU ... Angers & Senegal
DIEGO ... Flamengo & Brazil
DIEGO ALVES ... Valencia & Brazil
DIEGO SOUZA ... Sport & Brazil
Eric DIER ... Tottenham & England
Landry DIMATA ... Oostende & Belgium
Lois DIONY ... Dijon & France
P44 Kasper DOLBERG ... Ajax & Denmark
Gianluigi DONNARUMMA ... Milan & Italy
Giovanni DOS SANTOS ... Los Angeles & Mexico
Jonathan DOS SANTOS ... Villarreal & Mexico
Bas DOST ... Sporting & Holland
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WILLIAM POTTKER ... Ponte Preta & Brazil
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P72 WILLIAN ... Chelsea & Brazil
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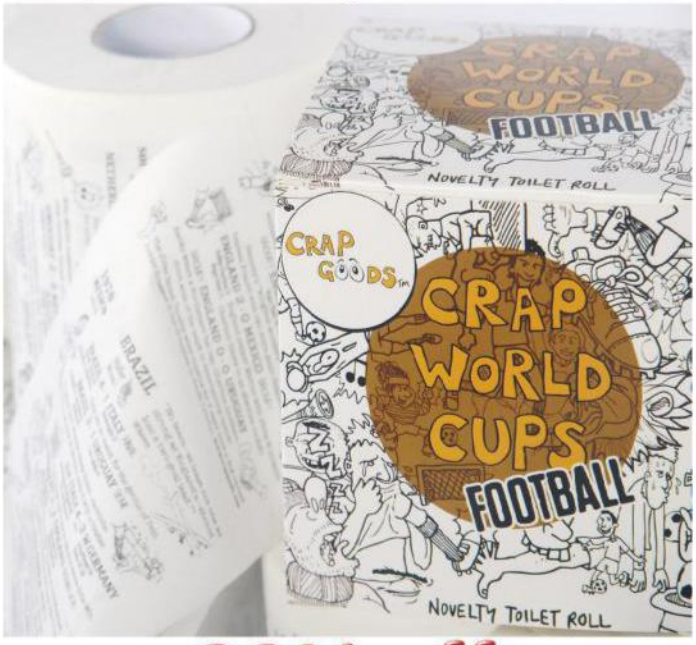

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Ready...Flamengo's Paolo Guerrero (right)

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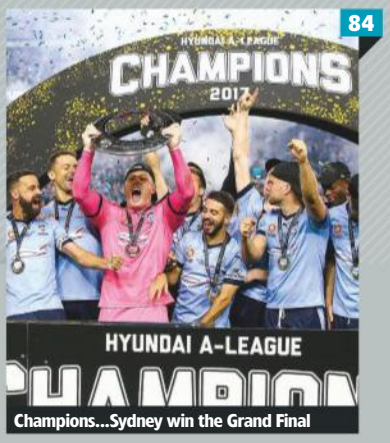

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Champions...Sydney win the Grand Final

Brazil

TIM VICKERY

Selecao success has a knock-on effect

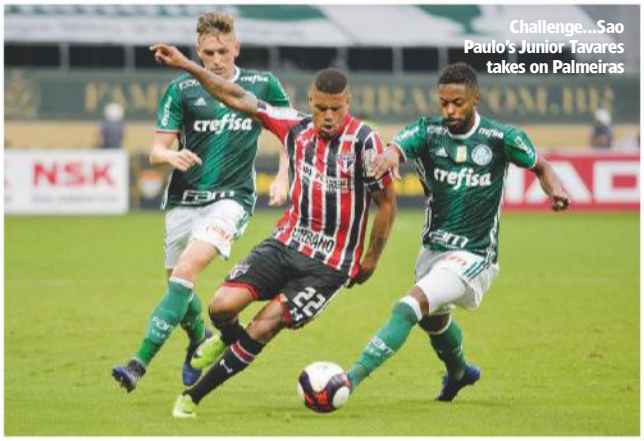
National team will inspire country's club sides

For all the country's economic and political woes, the 2017 version of the Brazilian championship holds undoubted promise. And while there is the constant – the sheer size of the country and the number of huge clubs guarantees a certain lack of predictability – there are also some pleasing variables.

With salaries in Brazil far higher than those in the rest of South America, there has been an influx of fine players from elsewhere on the continent. In the past, language was a barrier to effective contact – while Brazil speaks Portuguese, the rest of the continent uses Spanish – but Brazilian clubs are now less isolationist and more open to the opportunities around them. As a result, talents such as Peruvian centre-forward Paolo Guerrero (Flamengo), playmaker compatriot Cristian Cueva (Sao Paulo), Uruguayan midfielder Giorgian De Arrascaeta (Cruzeiro), Colombian centre-back Yerry Mina (Palmeiras) and Argentinian centre-forward Lucas Pratto (Sao Paulo) all grace Campeonato Brasileiro Serie A these days.

And, for once, the football calendar is also a little easier. For a start, there is no major international tournament to create problems, with this summer's Confederations Cup likely to involve just one Chilean player for a few weeks. Last year, the Copa America Centenario was followed by the Olympics and robbed the domestic game of many of its best players.

There are also advantages in the Libertadores Cup having been extended to last the entire year. Previously squeezed into the first few months, the Libertadores' knockout phase coincided with the opening rounds of the Brazilian league, which inevitably meant that the big domestic kick-off was undermined by clubs still involved in continental competition, field understrength sides. That is no longer a problem.



Challenge...Sao Paulo's Junior Tavares takes on Palmeiras

Even the dreadful state championships that open the year have not wreaked their usual managerial carnage. By the start of May, just four top-flight teams – Vasco da Gama, Ponte Preta, Coritiba and Sport – had changed their coach, and with more continuity there is more chance of interesting tactical ideas. And this is especially true in the wake of the success of the *Selecao*.

Brazil's national side retains the power to influence the way club coaches set up their sides. The 1994 World Cup win, for example, had a negative side as everyone started playing two defensive midfielders – but with no one possessing the ability on the ball of Mauro Silva and Dunga. The 2002 triumph, meanwhile, popularised the use of three centre-backs.

The sudden spurt to 2018 qualification, with eight successive wins under Tite achieved with a swaggering style, can do a power of good.

As a consequence of Tite's study of top-class European football – the way that teams achieve numerical superiority in midfield and stay compact in the opponent's half in order to retain possession – a team that were struggling so badly under Dunga has suddenly been transformed into one of the favourites for Russia next year. It is an inspiring example of the power of an idea.

Brazilian club football has become lazy in this area – and the national team under Tite has given it a welcome jolt. It will be fascinating to see who rises to the domestic challenge over the next eight and a half months.

In the past two years, and nine times in the last 15, the league winners have come from the state of Sao Paulo, which

Battle...Corinthians' Rodriguinho (in white) in the thick of the action against Vasco da Gama

CAMPEONATO BRASILEIRO SERIE A: 2017

1 Atletico Goianiense
2 Atletico Mineiro (Belo Horizonte)
Cruzeiro
3 Atletico Paranaense (Curitiba)
Coritiba
4 Avai (Florianopolis)
5 Bahia (Salvador)
Vitoria
6 Botafogo (Rio de Janeiro)
Flamengo
Fluminense
Vasco da Gama
7 Chapecoense (Chapeco)
8 Corinthians (Sao Paulo)
Palmeiras
Sao Paulo
9 Santos
10 Gremio (Porto Alegre)
11 Ponte Preta (Campinas)
12 Sport (Recife)

Talent...Flamengo's Paolo Guerrero

Preview

is therefore the obvious place in which to look for the 2017 front runners.

Defending champions Palmeiras have a rebuilt stadium and a wealthy sponsor, which puts them in a comfortable financial position and has enabled them to assemble a squad of frightening depth. Sao Paulo's new coach, their former keeper Rogerio Ceni, is attempting to implant a high-pressing style. While the approach has its risks, Ceni's legendary status at the club will buy him some time. Corinthians have adopted a more cautious style and may lack the attacking quality needed to mount a serious challenge.

Santos possess a bright, attractive side that is at least as good as the one that finished second last time out, but they must improve their record away from home. The other Sao Paulo side are Ponte Preta, from the city of Campinas, and they sprang a surprise by beating Palmeiras in April and making it through to the Final of the state championship.

Rio giants Flamengo pushed Palmeiras hard last year before dropping off to finish third, while Fluminense, with their rapid attack, excellent youth policy and the shrewd Abel Braga in charge, may also put in a challenge.

Botafogo were one of last year's big surprises. Seen as relegation candidates, they finished fifth and have made a decent start in the Libertadores. Vasco da Gama are back in the top flight after three relegations in the last decade, and many of their fans fear a fourth.

On the three occasions in the last 15 years that the title eluded Sao Paulo or Rio, it went to Cruzeiro of Belo Horizonte. Under former national coach Mano Menezes they are looking strong this year – as are local rivals Atletico Mineiro.

Legend...Sao Paulo coach Rogerio Ceni

The other major power are Gremio from Porto Alegre, although the loss of striker Luan in the transfer window is a real possibility. There are four other teams from the south, of whom Atletico Paranaense look the strongest. For Coritiba, promoted Avai and Chapecoense survival is the main priority – which is especially understandable in the case of the latter, who are rebuilding after last year's air tragedy.

Newly-promoted Atletico Goianense would be happy just to avoid relegation, while Vitoria and newcomers Bahia will hope to consolidate. Sport from Recife would also probably settle for not being drawn into a relegation scrap at the bottom. WS

KEY DATES

Season started: May 13, 2017
Season ends: December 2, 2017

APRIL 10-MAY 11, 2017

Global diary

A comprehensive record of recent events around the world

Monday April 10

ARGENTINA: National coach Edgardo Bauza departs with Argentina outside the automatic qualification spots for Russia 2018.
IRAQ: Radhi Shenaishil is sacked after Iraq's poor performances in the World Cup qualifiers.
ITALY: Genoa dismiss coach Andrea Mandorlini after the previous day's 3-0 defeat at Udinese and rehire Ivan Juric, who they fired in February.
TURKEY: Emmanuel Adebayor scores a hat-trick as Istanbul Basaksehir beat city rivals Galatasaray 4-0.

Tuesday April 11

ARGENTINA: Juan Sebastian Veron returns to professional football at the age of 42 as Estudiantes lose 2-0 to Barcelona of Ecuador in the Libertadores Cup.
GERMANY: Borussia Dortmund's Champions League game against Monaco is put back 24 hours after their team bus was damaged by three explosions on route to the stadium that leaves defender Marc Bartra with a fractured wrist.
ITALY: Juventus beat Barcelona 3-0 in the home leg of their Champions League quarter-final. Diego Bortoluzzi becomes Palermo's fifth coach of the season as he replaces Diego Lopez.

Wednesday April 12

BRAZIL: Palmeiras score in the 10th minute of stoppage time to beat Penarol 3-2 in a dramatic Libertadores Cup clash, Fabiano heading home the winner from a corner in the 100th minute.
GERMANY: Borussia Dortmund lose 3-2 to Monaco in their re-arranged Champions League game.
ITALY: Genoa defender Armando Izzo, who was called into the national squad for the first time in November, is handed an 18-month suspension for failing to report match fixing in 2014 during his time at Avellino.
SPAIN: Cristiano Ronaldo gets his 100th goal in European club competition with a brace in Real Madrid's 3-2 Champions League win at Bayern Munich. Atletico Madrid beat Leicester City 1-0.

Thursday April 13

ALGERIA: Dismissed by Granada on Monday, with the club bottom of La Liga, Lucas Alcaraz is named coach of Algeria's national team.
BELGIUM: Genk surrender an early lead to lose 3-2 at Celta Vigo in the Europa League, while Anderlecht draw 1-1 with Manchester United.
BRAZIL: Fred scores four times in the final 20 minutes as Atletico Mineiro beat Sport Boys of Bolivia 5-2 in the Libertadores Cup.
FRANCE: Fighting fans delay kick-off for 45 minutes before Lyon beat Besiktas with two goals in the closing 10 minutes to win 2-1.
HOLLAND: Ajax beat Schalke 2-0 to make it 12 European home games in a row without defeat.
ITALY: Chinese investors Rossoneri Sport Investment Lux complete the €740m takeover of Milan.
SWEDEN: Ostersund win the Swedish Cup for the first time, beating Norrkoping 4-1 in the Final.

Drama...Fabiano heads Palmeiras' late winner against Penarol

Friday April 14

AUSTRALIA: Besart Berisha gets his 100th A-League goal as Melbourne Victory win 1-0 at home to Central Coast Mariners.

Saturday April 15

AUSTRALIA: A-League Premier Plate winners Sydney wrap up the season with a 2-0 victory over Newcastle Jets to finish on a competition record of 66 points.
FRANCE: Nice book a ticket for next season's Champions League with a 3-1 victory against Nancy that guarantees a top-three finish.
INDONESIA: League football returns to Indonesia for the first time since 2014 following the lifting of FIFA sanctions, with Michael Essien and Carlton Cole debuting for Persib Bandung in a 0-0 draw with Arema.
IRAN: Persepolis clinch the Pro League title with a 2-0 win away to Machine Sazi.
ITALY: Gonzalo Higuain scores both goals as Juventus win 2-0 at bottom side Pescara. Milan draw 2-2 with Internazionale.
PANAMA: International midfielder Amilcar Henriquez, 33, dies in a shooting in his home city of Colon.
SCOTLAND: Hibernian seal their return to the Premiership after an

Veteran... Juan Sebastian Veron (right)

absence of three seasons, and wrap up the Championship title, beating Queen of the South 3-0.
SPAIN: Osasuna keeper Salvatore Sirigu saves two penalties in as many minutes but his side still lose 3-0 at Atletico Madrid.

Sunday April 16

AZERBAIJAN: Qarabag beat Inter Baku 3-0 to win a fourth league title in a row.
FRANCE: Lyon's game at Bastia is delayed for 55 minutes after they are attacked during the warm-up by home fans. The game is then abandoned at half-time after another pitch invasion.
SPAIN: Tony Adams' reign as coach of Granada begins with a 3-0 loss at home to Celta Vigo.

Monday April 17

ARGENTINA: A 22-year-old man dies two days after falling from a stand in an attack by Belgrano fans who thought he was a supporter ➤

Spot on... Salvatore Sirigu

India

JOHN DUERDEN

National champions set to miss out

League winners could be demoted next season

National champions for the first time in their history, Aizawl from the north-east province of Mizoram ended the season top of the I-League. Their victory celebrations did not last long, however, as the club now finds itself excluded from the top tier of Indian football.

In a bid to unite the game in the world's second-most populous country, with over 1.2 billion people, the All India Football Federation (AIFF) plans to merge the I-League with the Indian Super League (ISL). And Aizawl can't afford to take part.

Set up in 2014, the ISL consists of eight franchises, all owned by an exciting mix of Bollywood stars, cricket legends and business tycoons. The new competition kicked off with a host of veteran star players such as Alessandro Del Piero and Robert Pires, and high-profile coaches Zico, Peter Reid and Marco Materazzi. Played over a three-month season, the ISL has been a huge success, attracting attendances in excess of 25,000 and cultivating a glamorous media profile.

All of which is in stark contrast to the I-League – which began in 2007 – with its 5,000 crowds, little money and a lack of stars.

So it came as no surprise when the AIFF announced it wanted to merge the two leagues, combing the glitz of the ISL with the history of the big I-League clubs such as Mohun Bagan and East Bengal – whose Kolkata Derby attracts over 100,000 fans – and establishing a connection with the rest of the Indian football pyramid.

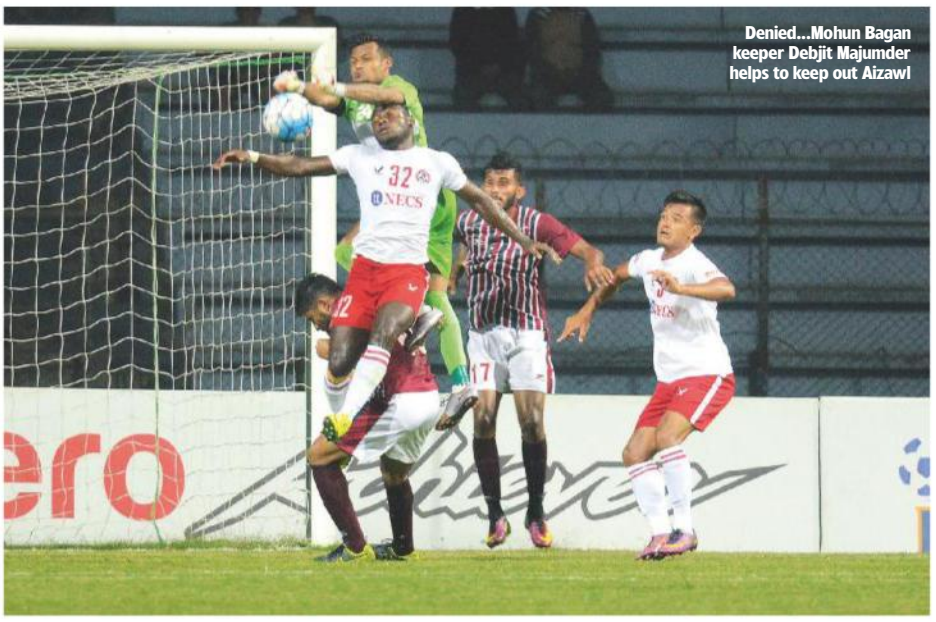
In reality, however, the proposed merger seems little more a coronation of the ISL at the top tier of Indian football; the tournament going from a stand-alone, 10-week festival of football, from October to December, to being the apex of the Indian domestic game.

Two or three I-League teams would pay over $2million to join, with the two Kolkata giants hoping to get in on the cheap due to their "heritage status". Aizawl, with annual operating costs of around $300,000, can't afford the entry fee.

"We have already written to the AIFF claiming a place in the new merged league," says Aizawl's owner, Robert Royte. "Till now we've received no response. Being the champions in the top national league, if any team is demoted to the second division, naturally that will invite protests of all kinds. Anything can happen."

And such is the sense of outrage among the club's supporters that Royte claims: "We will have people fasting unto death."

Although the AIFF claim no decision has yet been taken over Aizawl, the country's reigning champions fear they will be denied the chance to defend their title and could be a second-tier side next term. WS



Denied...Mohun Bagan keeper Debjit Majumder helps to keep out Aizawl

CONCACAF

MARTIN DEL PALACIO LANGER

Pachuca maintain Mexican dominance

Liga MX clubs in charge of Champions League once again

Champions... Pachuca will now head to the Club World Cup

Dominance of the CONCACAF Champions League by Liga MX clubs is so overwhelming that it's barely newsworthy any longer, with this year being the fifth time in the past six tournaments that two Mexican sides have contested the Final. No other nation have been home to the region's title-winners since 2005.

The general storylines of the 2016-17 edition were very similar to those of recent competitions, with an easy ride for the Mexican and US teams in the early phases, and the semi-finals contested by two Liga MX and two MLS clubs, before the sides from south of the border progressed without too much trouble.

Liga MX is certainly the richest league in Latin America, with its clubs investing millions of dollars each year to hire the best of the talent on the continent that hasn't been snapped up by the European elite. Even the weakest sides have one or two South American internationals on wages that are at least comparable, if not better, than the pay offered by the biggest teams in Argentina and Brazil.

And of the Mexican big-hitters, no one has spent more money than Tigres.

Owned by cement multinational giant Cemex and current domestic champions, the Monterrey-based side has become a kind of "dream team" of the region over the last few years, boasting a plethora of internationals that include five Mexicans, two Argentinians, two Colombians, a Peruvian, a Chilean, an American and a Frenchman.

Yet despite their wealth, Tigres have never won the CONCACAF Champions League – unlike Pachuca, their opponents in this year's Final who have a completely different philosophy.

Although they also make millionaire signings from time to time, Pachuca have focused on developing players from their youth academy, who they sell for a big profit as soon as they have groomed a replacement. Spearheaded by 21-year-old winger Hirving Lozano, who is already an established Mexico international and the subject of much attention from Europe, Pachuca won the 2016 clausura tournament with a mixture of young local talent and smart signings from abroad.

Disaster...Tigres' Guido Pizarro is sent off

But while this year's Final was disputed by two teams with completely different philosophies off the pitch, the pair have very similar systems on it.

Even with the abundance of riches at his disposal, Tigres' veteran coach Ricardo Ferretti has always been conservative, opting for a system that prioritises order rather than flair. His counterpart, Diego Alonso, began his stint at Pachuca with a fast and offensive style, but a poor run of results this season made him change his plans. Consequently, his team reached the Final having conceded just one goal in their previous five matches.

As expected, the Final was an even and hard-fought affair. After just two minutes of the first leg in Monterrey, Pachuca got a lucky break when an innocuous free-kick from right-back Raul Lopez hit a Tigres player's back and ended up in the net.

Half an hour later, Ismael Sosa equalised for the hosts, who could have scored a second but Chile international Eduardo Vargas missed

> Of the Mexican big-hitters, no one has spent more money than Tigres

a penalty and took momentum off his team as Pachuca saw off the rest of the match without too much trouble.

The return game was even less spectacular. Too cautious, the teams took only the necessary risks and generated few chances. Yet just as it looked as though Tigres might be on their way to the title thanks to their away goal, disaster struck. Midfielder Guido Pizarro was sent off with 12 minutes remaining and then Argentina international goalkeeper Nahuel Guzman failed to hold a tame long-range shot from Lozano, allowing Franco Jara to take advantage of the rebound and score the only goal of the game.

The result was a resounding failure for Tigres' expensive squad, for whom the tournament had been top priority this term.

Pachuca, meanwhile, were crowned regional champions for a fifth time. Their problem, however, has always been the next step, failing to make the Final of the Club World Cup in any of their three previous attempts. It is a streak that they will now to try to end in the UAE this December. WS

Clash...Franco Jara challenges Tigres keeper Nahuel Guzman

➤ derby opponents Talleres.

BELGIUM: Standard Liege appoint former assistant coach Jose Jeunechamps on an interim basis.

ENGLAND: Brighton & Hove Albion's 2-1 win over Wigan Athletic, coupled with Huddersfield Town's 1-1 draw at Derby County, sees them return to the top flight after 34 years.

Tuesday April 18

LATVIA: Aleksandrs Starkovs, who had been working for the Latvian Football Federation and coaching Skonto's youth teams, is appointed national coach for a third time, replacing Marians Pahars, who stepped down in March after a defeat by Georgia.

MEXICO: Pachuca's Alfonso Blanco saves Eduardo Vargas' second-half penalty as his side draw 1-1 at Tigres in the CONCACAF Champions League Final first leg.

NORTHERN IRELAND: Portadown, who began the season on minus 12 points for a breach of rules on player registration, lose 3-2 at Ards and are relegated.

SCOTLAND: Second bottom in the league, Dundee sack Paul Hartley and appoint Neil McCann as interim boss until the end of the season.

SPAIN: Cristiano Ronaldo scores a hat-trick to take his Champions League tally to 100 goals as holders Real Madrid beat Bayern Munich 6-3 on aggregate in extra-time to reach the semi-finals. They are joined by Atletico Madrid, who beat Leicester City 2-1 on aggregate.

Wednesday April 19

FRANCE: Monaco beat Borussia Dortmund 6-3 on aggregate to reach the last four of the Champions League.

ITALY: Juventus hold Barcelona to a goalless draw in Spain to win 3-0 on aggregate and progress to the Champions League semi-finals.

MEXICO: Miguel Jimenez saves three spot-kicks as Guadalajara beat Morelia 3-1 on penalties to win the Clausura Copa MX, after a 0-0 draw.

Thursday April 20

ENGLAND: Manchester United beat Anderlecht 2-1 in extra-time to reach the Europa League semis.

FRANCE: Maxime Gonalons scores the winner as Lyon beat Besiktas on penalties in the Europa League.

HOLLAND: Despite losing 3-2 at Schalke, Ajax reach a European semi-final for the first time in 20 years with a 4-3 aggregate victory.

SAUDI ARABIA: Al Hilal are Saudi Pro League champions thanks to a 2-1 win over Al Shabab.

SPAIN: Celta Vigo are in a European semi-final for the first time after a draw at Genk in the Europa League.

Friday April 21

ENGLAND: Former England and Aston Villa defender Ugo Ehiogu, 44, dies after suffering a cardiac arrest the previous day at Tottenham Hotspur's training ground, where he was the club's under-23s coach.

GERMANY: Police arrest a man on suspicion of the bomb attack on Borussia Dortmund's team bus last week, but prosecutors rule out a terrorist motive and suggest it was part of a scheme to profit from a slump in the club's share price following the attack.

Saturday April 22

ENGLAND: Chelsea beat Tottenham Hotspur 4-2 in their FA Cup semi-final at Wembley.

RUSSIA: Zenit inaugurate their new 70,000-capacity Zenit Arena with a 2-0 win against Ural, who have three players sent off.

Sunday April 23

CZECH REPUBLIC: International midfielder Frantisek Rajtoral, who plays for Gaziantepspor in Turkey, commits suicide at the age of 31.

ENGLAND: Chelsea's N'Golo Kante is named PFA Players' Player of the Year, while Tottenham Hotspur's Dele Alli wins the Young Player award for a second successive year. Arsenal beat Manchester City 2-1 to reach the FA Cup Final.

GREECE: Olympiakos beat PAS Giannina 5-0 to win the Greek championship for a 44th time.

HOLLAND: Second place Ajax lose 1-0 at third-place PSV.

SCOTLAND: Celtic beat Rangers 2-0 and will meet Aberdeen in the Scottish Cup Final.

SLOVAKIA: MSK Zilina win 1-0 at closest challengers Slovan Bratislava to secure their seventh league title.

SPAIN: Two minutes into injury time, Lionel Messi scores his second goal of the game, and 500th for the club, as Barcelona win 3-2 away to Real Madrid.

Monday April 24

AUSTRIA: Red Bull Salzburg recover from a goal down to beat Benfica 2-1 in the UEFA Youth League Final.

ENGLAND: Just 348 days after they were relegated from the ➤

➤ Premier League, Newcastle United are promoted following a 4-1 victory over Preston North End.
ITALY: A 4-1 loss at home to Roma sends Pescara down to Serie B with five games still to play.
USA: Frank Yallop resigns as coach of Phoenix Rising, less than a month into the USL club's season and the day after ex-Chelsea striker Didier Drogba joins as player-owner.

Tuesday April 25

BRAZIL: Former Flamengo keeper Bruno Fernandes, who signed for second-tier Boa Esporte on his release from jail on parole, is sent back to prison to continue serving a 22-year term for his role in the kidnapping and murder of an ex-girlfriend in 2010.
HOLLAND: On what would have been his 70th birthday, Ajax announce their Amsterdam Arena will be renamed the Johan Cruyff Arena in tribute to their former player and coach, who died in 2016 following a battle with lung cancer.
SPAIN: Atletico Madrid's 12-game unbeaten run in all competitions comes to an end with a 1-0 defeat at home to Villarreal.

Wednesday April 26

FRANCE: Paris Saint-Germain thrash Monaco 5-0 in the semi-finals and stay on course for a third successive French Cup.
GERMANY: Borussia Dortmund come from behind to beat Bayern Munich 3-2 and now face Eintracht Frankfurt in the German Cup Final.
MEXICO: Pachuca beat Tigres 2-1 on aggregate to win the CONCACAF Champions League.
SAN MARINO: Tre Penne beat La Fiorita in the Cup Final.
SPAIN: Barcelona win 7-1 at home to Osasuna – who are relegated when Leganes defeat Las Palmas 3-0 – while Real Madrid beat Deportivo La Coruna 6-2.

Thursday April 27

ENGLAND: Marouane Fellaini is sent off for headbutting Sergio Aguero as Manchester United draw 0-0 at Manchester City.
TUNISIA: Former international Nabil Maaloul is appointed Tunisia coach for a second time.

Friday April 28

ENGLAND: Tottenham Hotspur confirm they will play all their home games at Wembley next season while construction work on their new stadium takes place.
SWITZERLAND: Basle win 2-1 at Lucerne and are Swiss ➤

Australia

SIMON HILL

Victory beaten on penalties in Final

Sydney triumph after dominating all season

Although they dominated the regular season, Sydney had to rely on penalties to see off a dogged Melbourne Victory in the Grand Final in a brutal finale that saw nine yellow cards issued and more than 50 fouls committed.

Besart Berisha's fifth Grand Final goal had given Victory the lead, but an equaliser from Rhyan Grant took the game into extra-time and then spot-kicks.

After Carl Valeri and Marco Rojas missed for Victory it was left to Milos Ninkovic to stroke home the winning kick to give Sydney a third title, and their first in seven years.

It was a fitting reward for Graham Arnold's team, who set the tone for the campaign right from the opening weekend when they hammered rivals Western Sydney Wanderers 4-0 in front of an extraordinary crowd of nearly 62,000 at ANZ Stadium. They would go on to break records aplenty on their way to winning the Premiership by 17 points – including the most points (66), the most wins (20), and the fewest goals conceded (12).

Sydney's success was down to smart recruitment, with Arnold signing four Australian internationals, a top goalkeeper in Danny Vukovic and marquee striker Bobo, who contributed 15 goals. Arnold then set his side up in a system that was based on a collective structure which was designed to win the ball back as high up the pitch as possible.

In any other season, Victory's haul of 49 points would have put them very close to winning the Premiers Plate, but Kevin Muscat's team had the misfortune to come up against a side that is already being compared to the great Brisbane team that won

Final...Sydney's Alex Wilkinson is beaten by Besart Berisha of Melbourne Victory

A-LEAGUE 2016-17

PLAYER OF THE SEASON
Milos Ninkovic (Sydney)
The 32-year-old Serbian playmaker contributed nine goals and 11 assists in an impressive campaign and deservedly won the Johnny Warren Medal as the A-League's best player.

COACH OF THE SEASON
Graham Arnold (Sydney)
This season was a big test of his abilities after missing the finals last year. His recruitment was spot-on and his players bought into a style of play which other teams simply couldn't live with.

NEWCOMER OF THE SEASON
Riley McGree (Adelaide United)
In a league where youngsters can struggle for opportunities, the teenager was a breath of fresh air. By the end of the season, coach Ange Postecoglou had called him into the national squad.

back to back titles in 2011 and 2012.

Perhaps worn down by the relentless grind of having to chase Sydney, Victory suffered a major lapse in form after an excellent start to the season, winning just five of their last 13 games, although they did recover well enough to reach the Grand Final. Individually, Rojas and James Troisi enjoyed fine returns to the A-League, and during the course of the season Berisha became the first player in the competition's history to reach 100 goals.

Melbourne City ended their trophy drought by winning the FFA Cup in November, but rather than that being the catalyst for an expected title assault they inexplicably fell away, despite 11 goals from returning hero Tim Cahill and 17 from Bruno Fornaroli. Coach John Van't Schip left mid-season to be with his ailing father back in Holland, and his replacement, Michael Valkanis, was unable to find any consistency.

Perth Glory were the great entertainers, scoring 53 goals and conceding just as many. The talismanic Diego Castro had a sensational second half of the season, but a leaky defence meant they were only ever a puncher's chance in the finals.

Brisbane Roar, meanwhile, were the nearly men once more, finishing third after an horrendous injury list and Asian Champions League travel derailed their bid for a fourth championship. However, Roar striker Jamie Maclaren shared the golden boot with Berisha.

Western Sydney Wanderers had a difficult campaign, finishing sixth on the back of a relocation to Spotless Stadium, while Wellington Phoenix's much-lauded attack failed to produce the expected number of goals.

Prolific...Tim Cahill and Bruno Fornaroli (left) of Melbourne City

Central Coast Mariners avoided last spot courtesy of a derby win over the Newcastle Jets, who were bottom for the second time in three seasons.

Reigning champions Adelaide United were a huge disappointment and coach Gui Amor stepped down at the end of the campaign. They took nine matches to register their first win and only a late burst of form avoided the indignity of going from champs to chumps in the space of a season. WS

➤ Champions for the eighth consecutive season.

Saturday April 29

ENGLAND: A 1-0 loss at home to Bournemouth, coupled with Hull City's 0-0 draw at Southampton, sees Sunderland relegated from the Premier League.
GERMANY: Bayern Munich win 6-0 away to Wolfsburg to clinch their fifth straight Bundesliga title.
ISRAEL: Hapoel Be'er Sheva claim a second successive Premier League title with a 2-1 victory over Maccabi Tel Aviv.
NORTHERN IRELAND: Andrew Waterworth scores a second-half hat-trick as Linfield beat Cliftonville 3-1 to clinch the Irish Premiership.
QATAR: Captained by ex-Barcelona midfielder Xavi, Al Sadd beat El Jaish 2-1 to win the Qatar Cup.
SCOTLAND: Celtic beat Rangers 5-1 and record their biggest away win over their rivals for 120 years.
SPAIN: Granada's 2-1 defeat at Real Sociedad sees them relegated.
UAE: Al Jazira beat Hatta 5-0 to win the Arabian Gulf League title and will now represent host country United Arab Emirates at this year's Club World Cup.

Sunday April 30

ENGLAND: Tottenham Hotspur beat Arsenal 2-0 to ensure they will finish above their North London rivals for the first time in 22 years.
GERMANY: A 1-0 win at home to Eintracht Frankfurt guarantees Hoffenheim a place in at least the Champions League qualifiers for the first time in their history.
HOLLAND: Vitesse win 2-0 against AZ in the Dutch Cup Final and claim the first major trophy in their 125-year history.
ITALY: Lazio win 3-1 away to Roma in the Derby della Capitale. Pescara's Sulley Muntari walks off the pitch after he is booked for complaining about racial abuse during his side's 1-0 loss at Cagliari.
WALES: Bala Town come from behind to beat holders The New Saints 2-1 and win the Welsh Cup for the first time.

Monday May 1

UEFA: European football's governing body outlines specific criteria in regards to human rights measures in its requirements for would-be Euro 2024 hosts Germany and Turkey.

Tuesday May 2

POLAND: Lech Poznan lose in the Polish Cup Final for the third ➤

Africa

MARK GLEESON

CAF comps get big cash injection

Investment will help continent's club game to grow

African football estimates that the next decade will deliver more than $1 billion in marketing and television revenue, suggesting heady days lie ahead for the game on the continent.

For some time now Africa has been talked up as the next frontier for economic expansion and an expansion of the two annual continental club competitions fits firmly into that vision.

But by doubling the group phase of both the Champions League and the Confederation Cup, CAF is primarily looking to inject some life into competitions that have fallen sadly short of their potential and are in urgent need of a boost.

This year both competitions went up from eight to 16 teams in the group phase, following two rounds of knockout ties in the Champions League and an added preliminary round in the Confederation Cup, in which those losing in the second round of the Champions League get another chance. As is the case with the Europa League, this is an attempt to add lustre to a competition that can be bogged down by mediocrity.

The prize money has also been vastly increased, although for many clubs any revenue earned from their share of TV and marketing rights is gobbled up by the prohibitive cost of travelling to fulfill the fixtures. However, most clubs enjoy some sort of state assistance, particularly those in north Africa who have been the most successful.

CAF's recent congress in Addis Ababa heard that Lagardere Sports and Entertainment, a Paris-based company with a long-time stranglehold on the revenues of the African game, has committed to paying a minimum guarantee of $1 bn for a 12-year cycle. What this means is there is money to embark on ambitious expansion even if it is taking something of a risk with a product far from being anywhere near polished.

The next few months will see whether there is the capacity to handle the expansion and whether the competitions generate some much needed excitement in a region where the UEFA Champions League and English Premier League capture the vast majority of the television eyes.

Poor TV coverage is arguably the biggest downfall, with sloppy production standards. However, CAF and Lagardere will still make it the responsibility of the host association to ensure television coverage rather than do it themselves and thereby ensure a uniform standard.

Also hampering the Champions League and Confederation Cup are poor playing standards, bumpy pitches and too many controversies, usually involving dubious refereeing.

Half this year's Champions League field is from north Africa, where the majority of past winners hail from and from where most of the front runners are again likely to emerge. These include eight-time winners Al Ahly of Egypt, their compatriots Zamalek, who finished runners-up last year, and Etoile Sahel from Tunisia.

Etoile look to have the easiest assignment in their bid to get through to the quarter-final stage, having been drawn in Group A with two Sudanese clubs, Al Hilal and Al Merreikh, and newcomers Ferroviario Beira from Mozambique.

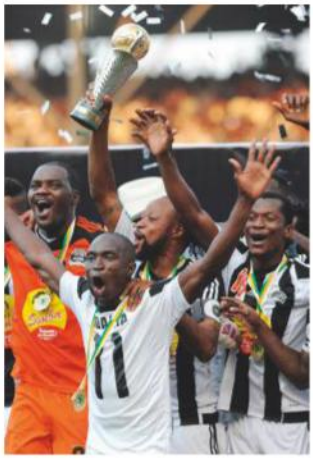
Zamalek and USM Alger will be fancied in Group B, as will Ahly and Morocco's Wydad in Group D.

In Group C, holders Mamelodi Sundowns of South

Fancied...Zamalek (in white) and Al Ahly

By doubling the group phase of both the Champions League and the Confederation Cup, CAF is primarily looking to inject some life into competitions that have fallen sadly short of their potential

Winners...TP Mazembe celebrate last year's Confederation Cup success



Africa were paired once again with AS Vita Club of DR Congo, whose disqualification last year allowed Sundowns a back-door entry into the group stage.

Sundowns and Vita will be joined by two-time winners Esperance and newcomers St George of Ethiopia – an ambitious outfit who recently opened a new academy in Addis Ababa.

Continental champions in 2015, TP Mazembe of DR Congo have the chance to defend their Confederation Cup, having lost in the preliminary stage of the Champions League for two successive years. They will be favourites again, even though the club is going through a difficult time, with its financial backer in political exile in Belgium.

Also in the field are former African champions Mouloudia Alger and Club Africain of Tunisia, while CS Sfaxien and SuperSport United of South Africa will have genuine hopes of toppling Mazembe. WS

Holders... Mamelodi Sundowns

➤ season in a row, going down 2-1 to Arka Gdynia in extra-time.
RUSSIA: Two players from each side are sent off following a brawl in injury time as Lokomotiv Moscow beat Ural Yekaterinburg 2-0 to win the Russian Cup.
SPAIN: Cristiano Ronaldo scores a hat-trick as Real Madrid beat Atletico Madrid 3-0 in the home leg of their Champions League semi-final.

Wednesday May 3

FAROE ISLANDS: Playing in their first finals tournament at any age level, the Faroes kick-off the Euro Under-17 Championship in Croatia with a 2-0 loss to Scotland.
HOLLAND: Ajax beat Lyon 4-1 in the home leg of their Europa League semi-final.
ITALY: Gonzalo Higuain gets both goals as Juventus win 2-0 away to Monaco in the Champions League semi-finals.
MALI: FIFA lift the ban imposed on Mali after the country's executive committee, which was sacked by sports minister Housseini Amion Guindo, is re-instated.

Thursday May 4

ENGLAND: Marcus Rashford gives Manchester United a 1-0 lead after the away leg of their Europa League semi-final against Celta Vigo.
SOUTH AFRICA: Stuart Baxter, who led Bafana Bafana during qualifying for the 2006 World Cup, will coach the national side again when he has completed his current duties with SuperSport United.

Friday May 5

ENGLAND: Tottenham Hotspur lose 1-0 away to West Ham United.

Saturday May 8

GERMANY: RB Leipzig secure a place in the Champions League with a 4-1 win at Hertha Berlin. Darmstadt lose 1-0 at Bayern Munich and are relegated.
GREECE: Violence delays kick-off in the Greek Cup Final by 30 minutes before PAOK beat AEK Athens 2-1.
HONG KONG: Kitchee beat Eastern 4-1 to win the league title.
MEXICO: Raul Ruidiaz's 91st-minute winner against Monterrey saves Morelia from relegation and at the same time secures a place in the Clausura play-offs.
UKRAINE: Shakhtar Donetsk beat Zorya 3-2 and win the league title with four games to spare.

Sunday May 7

AUSTRALIA: Sydney win the Grand Final, beating Melbourne Victory in a penalty shoot-out.
NEW ZEALAND: Auckland City win 2-0 away to Team Wellington and claim a seventh OFC Champions League title in a row with a 5-0 aggregate victory in the Final.
RUSSIA: Zenit's 1-0 loss at home to Terek Grozny sees Spartak Moscow claim their first Russian Premier League crown for 16 years.

Monday May 8

ENGLAND: A 3-0 defeat at Chelsea sees Middlesbrough relegated after just one season in the top flight.
ITALY: Serie B side Pisa, who are coached by Gennaro Gattuso, lose 4-1 at home to Cittadella and are relegated, despite having the best defensive record in the division.

Tuesday May 9

FIFA: Football's governing body says it will not reappoint investigator Cornel Borbely or ethics adjudicator Hans-Joachim Eckert.
HOLLAND: Dick Advocaat will take charge of Holland when his contract with Fenerbahce expires at the end of the Turkish season.
ITALY: Juventus beat Monaco 2-1 to secure their place in the Champions League Final. Stefano Pioli is sacked by Internazionale.
KOSOVO: Trepca '89 clinch their first league title with a 2-0 victory away to Besa Peje.
SPAIN: Real Betis announce former captain Alexis Trujillo will take charge of their last two games of the season after sacking coach Victor Sanchez.
UGANDA: KCCA retain their league title, with two games to spare, with a 2-0 victory over Lweza.

Wednesday May 10

COLOMBIA: Atletico Nacional beat Chapecoense 4-1 to win the Recopa Sudamericana 5-3 on aggregate.
SPAIN: Despite beating Real Madrid 2-1 at the Vicente Calderon, Atletico Madrid exit the Champions League 4-2 on aggregate.

Thursday May 11

ENGLAND: Manchester United beat Celta Vigo 2-1 on aggregate in the Europa League semi-finals.
HOLLAND: Ajax lose 3-1 away to Lyon in the Europa League but win 5-4 on aggregate to reach their first continental Final since 1996.
IRAN: Sajjad Shahbazzadeh's 88th-minute goal gives Naft Tehran a 1-0 victory over Tractor Sazi in the Hazfi Cup Final. WS

Club football

EUROPE

UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Quarter-finals

1st legs

Apr11
Juventus (Ita) 3 (Dybala 7, 22, Chiellini 55)
Barcelona (Spa) 0
HT: 2-0. **Att:** 41,092. **Ref:** Marciniak (Pol)

Apr12
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 1 (Griezmann pen 28)
Leicester City (Eng) 0
HT: 1-0. **Att:** 51,423. **Ref:** Eriksson (Swe)

Apr12
Bayern Munich (Ger) 1 (Vidal 25)
Real Madrid (Spa) 2 (Cristiano Ronaldo 47, 77)
HT: 1-0. **Att:** 70,000. **Ref:** Rizzoli (Ita)
Sent off: Javi Martinez (Bayern Munich) 61

Apr12
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 2 (Dembele 57, Kagawa 84)
Monaco (Fra) 3 (Mbappe 19, 79, Bender og 35)
HT: 0-2. **Att:** 65,849. **Ref:** Orsato (Ita)

2nd legs

Apr18
Leicester City 1 (Vardy 61)
Atletico Madrid 1 (Saul 26)
HT: 0-1. **Att:** 31,548. **Ref:** Rocchi (Ita)
Atletico Madrid 2-1 on agg

Apr18
Real Madrid 4 (Cristiano Ronaldo 76, 105, 110, Marco Asensio 112)
Bayern Munich 2 (Lewandowski pen 53, Sergio Ramos og 78)
Aet. **HT:** 0-0. **90mins:** 1-2. **Att:** 78,346.
Ref: Kassai (Hun)
Sent off: Vidal (Bayern Munich) 84
Real Madrid 6-3 on agg

Apr19
Barcelona 0
Juventus 0
Att: 96,290. **Ref:** Kuipers (Hol)
Juventus 3-0 on agg

Apr19
Monaco 3 (Mbappe 3, Falcao 17, Germain 81)
Borussia Dortmund 1 (Reus 48)
HT: 2-0. **Att:** 17,135. **Ref:** Skomina (Sln)
Monaco 6-3 on agg

EUROPA LEAGUE

Quarter-finals

1st legs - Apr13; 2nd legs - Apr 20
Ajax (Hol) v Schalke (Ger)
2-0, 2-3 (aet) (agg 4-3)
Anderlecht (Blg) v Manchester United (Eng)
1-1, 1-2 (aet) (agg 2-3)
Celta Vigo (Spa) v Genk (Blg)
3-2, 1-1 (agg 4-3)
Lyon (Fra) v Besiktas (Tur)
2-1, 1-2 (aet) (agg 3-3, Lyon 7-6 on pens)

AZERBAIJAN

2016-17 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Qarabag (C)	28	19	5	4	46	14	62
Qabala	28	14	10	4	48	21	52
Inter	28	11	10	7	39	33	43
Zira	28	10	9	9	29	26	39
Kapaz	28	9	9	10	24	27	36
Sumqayit	28	9	8	11	28	35	35
Neftchi	28	9	2	17	24	45	29
AZAL (R)	28	1	7	20	13	50	10

GREECE

2016-17 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Olympiakos (C)	30	21	4	5	57	16	67
PAOK[1,2]	30	20	4	6	52	19	61
Panathinaikos[1]	30	16	9	5	45	19	57
AEK[1]	30	14	11	5	54	23	53
Panionios[1]	30	15	7	8	35	23	52
Xanthi	30	13	9	8	34	25	48
Platanias	30	11	9	10	34	38	42
Atromitos	30	11	6	13	29	38	39
Giannina	30	8	12	10	30	37	36
Kerkyra	30	8	8	14	22	43	32
Panetolikos	30	8	7	15	29	40	31
Iraklis	30	6	11	13	28	39	29
Asteras	30	6	10	14	34	49	28
Larissa	30	6	10	14	23	42	28
Levadiakos (R)	30	6	8	16	27	49	26
Veria (R)	30	5	7	18	23	56	22

[1]The teams finishing 2nd to 5th enter play-offs to decide which of them will take Greece's 2nd Champions League berth
[2]3pts deducted for failing to show up for a Greek Cup game last season

MALTA

2016-17 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Hibernians (C)	33	22	5	6	64	31	71
Balzan	33	19	7	7	66	40	64
Birkirkara	33	18	8	7	64	30	62
Valletta	33	16	11	6	51	29	59
Floriana	33	15	9	9	51	37	54
Sliema	33	15	7	11	47	37	52
Gzira United	33	10	7	16	43	51	37
St Andrews	33	9	10	14	45	51	37
Tarxien	33	8	11	14	38	48	35
Hamrun	33	9	6	18	44	61	33
Mosta[1,2]	33	7	5	21	29	71	21
Pembroke (R)	33	4	6	23	28	84	18

[1]Enter rel/prom play-off
[2]5pts deducted for making payments to a player registered as an amateur

NORTHERN IRELAND

Division split after 33-round regular season; teams carried forward full regular-season record

2016-17 – CHAMPIONSHIP GROUP – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Linfield (C)	38	27	8	3	87	24	89
Crusaders	38	27	6	5	83	36	87
Coleraine	38	18	11	9	56	42	65
Ballymena	38	18	5	15	75	73	59
Cliftonville	38	17	7	14	55	50	58
Glenavon	38	13	13	12	55	55	52

2016-17 – RELEGATION GROUP – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dungannon	38	14	10	14	67	59	52
Ards	38	13	8	17	61	70	47
Glentoran	38	12	10	16	45	53	46
Ball'mallard	38	10	5	23	45	72	35
Carrick[1]	38	5	7	26	31	79	22
Portadown[2] (R)	38	7	4	27	28	75	13

[1]Enter rel/prom play-off
[2]12pts deducted for making payments to a player registered as an amateur

WALES

Division split after 22-round regular season; teams carried forward full regular-season record

2016-17 – CHAMPIONSHIP GROUP – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
New Saints (C)	32	28	1	3	101	26	85
Connah's Quay	32	16	10	6	45	24	58
Bala	32	16	9	7	61	46	57
Bangor	32	16	4	12	53	53	52
Carmarthen	32	10	9	13	40	46	39
Cardiff Met Uni	32	10	6	16	41	41	36

2016-17 – RELEGATION GROUP – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Newtown	32	12	9	11	59	41	45
Cefn Druids	32	9	12	11	40	48	39
Llandudno	32	7	14	11	31	45	35
Aberystwyth	32	10	4	18	41	63	34
Rhyl (R)	32	8	6	18	38	76	30
Airbus UK (R)	32	5	6	21	37	78	21

AFRICA

CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group stage draw

Group A
Al Hilal Omdurman (Sud)
Al Merreikh (Sud)
Etoile Sahel (Tun)
Ferroviario Beira (Moz)

Group B
Al Ahli Tripoli (Lby)
CAPS United (Zim)
USM Alger (Alg)
Zamalek (Egy)

Group C
AS Vita (DRC)
Esperance Tunis (Tun)
Mamelodi Sundowns (SAf)
Saint George (Eth)

Group D
Al Ahly (Egy)
Coton Sport (Cam)
Wydad Casablanca (Mor)
Zanaco (Zam)

Matchdays: *May12-14, May 23/24, Jun 2-4, Jun 20/21, Jun 30-Jul 2, Jul 7-9*

● *Top 2 in each group qualify for quarter-finals*

CONFEDERATION CUP

Play-off round

1st legs - Apr 8-16; 2nd legs - Apr14-22
AC Leopards (Con) v Mbabane Swallows (Swa)
1-0, 2-4 (agg 3-4)
AS Port-Louis 2000 (Mts) v Club Africain (Tun)
1-2, 2-4 (agg 3-6)
Barrack Young Controllers (Lbr) v
SuperSport United (SAf) 1-1, 0-5 (agg 1-6)
Bidvest Wits (SAf) v Smouha (Egy)
0-0, 0-1 (agg 0-1)
CNaPS (Mad) v Recreativo Libolo (Ang)
1-1, 0-0 (agg 1-1, Recreativo on away goals)
Enugu Rangers (Nga) v Zesco United (Zam)
2-2, 0-3 (agg 2-5)
FUS Rabat (Mor) v Maghreb Fes (Mor)
2-1, 1-1 (agg 3-2)
Gambia Ports Authority (Gam) v
Al Hilal Obayed (Sud) 1-1, 0-3 (agg 1-4)
Horoya (Gui) v Ittihad Tanger (Mor)
2-0, 2-3 (agg 4-3)
KCCA (Uga) v Al Masry (Egy)
1-0, 0-1 (agg 1-1, KCCA 4-3 on pens)
Mounana (Gab) v ASEC Abidjan (IvC)
2-1, 0-0 (agg 2-1)
Rail Club du Kadiogo (BuF) v CS Sfaxien (Tun)
1-2, 0-2 (agg 1-4)
Rivers United (Nga) v Rayon Sports (Rwa)
2-0, 0-0 (agg 2-0)
Tanda (IvC) v Platinum Stars (SAf) 2-0, 0-2
(agg 2-2, Platinum Stars 5-4 on pens)
TP Mazembe (DRC) v JS Kabylie (Alg)
2-0, 0-0 (agg 2-0)
Young Africans (Tan) v MC Alger (Alg)
1-0, 0-4 (agg 1-4)

Group stage draw

Group A
Club Africain
FUS Rabat
KCCA
Rivers United

Group B
CS Sfaxien
Mbabane Swallows
MC Alger
Platinum Stars

Group C
Al Hilal Obayed
Recreativo Libolo
Smouha
Zesco United

Group D
Horoya
Mounana
SuperSport United
TP Mazembe

Matchdays: *May12-14, May 23/24, Jun 2-4, Jun 20/21, Jun 30-Jul 2, Jul 7-9*

● *Top 2 in each group qualify for quarter-finals*

DJIBOUTI

2016-17 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ali Sabieh (C)	18	16	1	1	63	14	49
Port	18	15	1	2	56	15	46
Garde Repub	18	10	3	5	53	20	33
Gendarmerie	18	7	5	6	37	17	26
Universite	18	6	6	6	31	22	24
Arhiba	18	5	7	6	25	21	22
Dikhil	18	5	6	7	22	18	21
Arta/SIHD	18	5	4	9	30	37	19
Hopital B'la (R)	18	3	3	12	31	43	12
Cite Stade (R)	18	0	0	18	10	151	0

LESOTHO

2016-17 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bantu (C)	26	19	5	2	50	13	62
Lioli	26	19	3	4	49	11	60
LCS	26	13	8	5	38	21	47
Kick4Life	26	13	6	7	42	28	45
Sky Battalion	26	12	5	9	33	27	41
Defence Force[1]	26	10	9	7	28	21	36
LMPS	26	8	12	6	23	20	36
Matlama[1]	26	9	11	6	38	25	35
Sundawana	26	7	10	9	25	29	31
Liphakoe	26	7	7	12	22	33	28
Linare	26	6	9	11	35	38	27
Likhopo	26	3	8	15	20	38	17
Rovers (R)	26	3	8	15	22	51	17
Butha-B'he (R)	26	1	3	22	18	88	6

[1]3pts deducted for causing a match to be abandoned

REUNION

2016-17 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts[1]
St-Pierroise (C)	26	21	3	2	66	17	92
St-Marienne	26	16	4	6	55	27	78
Jeanne d'Arc	26	13	6	7	51	36	71
St-Louisienne	26	11	10	5	40	33	69
Excelsior	26	11	9	6	36	21	68
Petite-Ile	26	10	5	11	34	33	61
St-Denis	26	9	8	9	34	35	61
Marsouins	26	8	7	11	30	37	57
St-Pauloise	26	9	3	14	40	53	56
Ste-Suzanne	26	6	11	9	28	43	55
St-Benoit	26	7	7	12	24	32	54
SDEFA	26	6	8	12	21	31	52
Capricorne (R)	26	5	10	11	31	44	51
Piton St-Leu (R)	26	2	5	19	12	60	37

[1]4pts for a win, 2pts for a draw, 1pt for a defeat

ASIA

AUSTRALIA

2016-17 – REGULAR – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sydney (Q)	27	20	6	1	55	12	66
Melb'rne V (Q)	27	15	4	8	49	31	49
Brisbane (Q)	27	11	9	7	43	37	42
Melb'rne C (Q)	27	11	6	10	49	44	39
Perth (Q)	27	10	9	8	53	53	39
W Sydney (Q)	27	8	12	7	35	35	36
Wellington P	27	8	6	13	41	46	30
Central Coast	27	6	5	16	31	52	23
Adelaide	27	5	8	14	25	46	23
Newcastle	27	5	7	15	28	53	22

The top 6 qualified for the championship play-offs (the top 2 went directly into the semi-finals)

Elimination finals
Apr 21: Brisbane Roar 1 Western Sydney Wanderers 1 (aet, Brisbane Roar 6-5 on pens).
Apr 23: Melbourne City 0 Perth Glory 2.

Semi-finals
Apr 29: Sydney 3 Perth Glory 0.
Apr 30: Melbourne Victory 1 Brisbane Roar 0.

2016-17 Championship Final
May 7: Sydney 1 Melbourne Victory 1 (aet, Sydney 4-2 on pens).

GUAM

2016-17 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Napa Rvrs (C)	16	13	0	3	87	25	39
Shipyard	16	13	0	3	87	26	39
Q Distributors	16	6	1	9	41	46	19
Strykers	16	5	1	10	47	64	16
Haya Utd (R)	16	2	0	14	24	125	6

HONG KONG

2016-17 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kitchee (C)	20	16	3	1	54	8	51
Eastern	20	15	4	1	60	25	49
Sthn District	20	10	6	4	48	21	36
South China	20	11	2	7	34	26	35
Yuen Long	20	9	4	7	36	23	31
Wofoo Tai Po	20	9	4	7	29	21	31
Rangers	20	7	5	8	31	33	26
Pegasus	20	7	5	8	35	35	26
Sapling	20	2	4	14	24	55	10
R&F	20	3	1	16	13	53	10
HKFC (R)	20	2	0	18	13	77	6

INDIA (I-League)

2017 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Aizawl (C)	18	11	4	3	24	14	37
Mohun Bagan	18	10	6	2	27	12	36
East Bengal	18	10	3	5	33	15	33
Bengaluru	18	8	6	4	30	15	30
Shill'g Lajong	18	7	5	6	24	23	26
Churchill Bros	18	5	5	8	24	26	20
Shivajians	18	4	6	8	22	30	18
Chennai City	18	4	5	9	15	29	17
Minerva Punjab	18	2	7	9	17	33	13
Mumbai (R)	18	2	7	9	9	28	13

IRAN

2016-17 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Persepolis (C)	30	20	6	4	46	14	66
Esteghlal T	30	16	9	5	45	27	57
Tractor Sazi	30	15	11	4	38	24	56
Zob Ahan	30	12	10	8	39	30	46
Sepahan	30	12	9	9	38	34	45
Paykan	30	12	8	10	39	38	44
Esteghlal K	30	10	11	9	36	34	41
Gostaresh	30	7	17	6	26	24	38
Naft Tehran	30	8	12	10	31	34	36
Foolad	30	7	14	9	30	32	35
Padideh	30	8	10	12	28	36	34
Sanat Naft	30	8	9	13	24	34	33
Saipa	30	7	11	12	20	30	32
Siah Jamegan	30	6	12	12	24	35	30
Saba Qom (R)	30	6	10	14	22	33	28
Machine S (R)	30	3	7	20	18	45	16

JORDAN

2016-17 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Faisaly (C)	22	13	7	2	32	11	46
Al Jazeera	22	12	8	2	37	19	44
Al Wehdat	22	11	9	2	32	13	42
Mansheyat	22	12	3	7	27	18	39
Al Ramtha	22	8	9	5	22	17	33
Al Hussein	22	7	9	6	26	29	30
Al Ahli	22	7	6	9	25	26	27
Shabab Ordon	22	7	3	12	27	31	24
That Ras	22	4	7	11	15	27	19
Al Buqa'a	22	4	7	11	19	36	19
Al Sareeh (R)	22	4	6	12	18	34	18
Sahab (R)	22	2	8	12	15	34	14

LEBANON

2016-17 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Ahed (C)	22	15	4	3	41	14	49
Salam Zgharta	22	12	4	6	35	29	40
Al Nejmeh	22	11	6	5	36	22	39
Al Ansar	22	9	5	8	35	40	32
Al Nabi Sheet	22	9	4	9	26	24	31
Safa	22	8	6	8	32	32	30
Tadamon Sour	22	9	3	10	25	25	30
Racing	22	8	6	8	26	30	30
Akhaa Ahli	22	9	2	11	35	37	29
Tripoli SC	22	8	4	10	34	31	28
Al Sahel (R)	22	7	4	11	21	23	25
Egtmaaey (R)	22	2	2	18	21	60	8

PALESTINE (Gaza)

2016-17 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Sadaqa (C)	22	11	7	4	31	18	40
Shabab Rafah	22	11	6	5	36	17	39
K'mat Rafah	22	10	9	3	25	15	39
Shabab KY	22	9	10	3	31	22	37
K'mat Shatea	22	7	7	8	27	30	28
Al Ittihad KY	22	6	9	7	26	29	27
Al Ahli Gaza	22	5	10	7	22	25	25
Al Ittihad Sh'a	22	6	7	9	22	27	25
Gaza SC	22	4	11	7	22	23	23
Al Hilal Gaza	22	5	8	9	20	27	23
Al Tofah (R)	22	4	9	9	22	34	21
K'mat KY (R)	22	3	9	10	20	37	18

PALESTINE (West Bank)

2016-17 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Hilal Quds (C)	22	14	4	4	38	17	46
Thaqafi	22	11	6	5	34	19	39
Ahli Al Khalil	22	11	6	5	35	21	39
Alsamu	22	10	7	5	35	23	37
Markaz Balata	22	9	8	5	23	18	35
Sh'b Al Khalil	22	9	7	6	26	18	34
Al Dahiriya	22	7	4	11	22	29	25
Al Khader	22	5	9	8	22	24	24
Taraji Wadi	22	6	6	10	22	31	24
Dora	22	6	6	10	17	26	24
Markaz T (R)	22	5	6	11	30	45	21
Yatta (R)	22	2	5	15	20	53	11

QATAR

2016-17 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lekhwiya (C)	26	19	6	1	79	33	63
Al Sadd	26	18	7	1	77	23	61
Al Rayyan	26	15	6	5	53	27	51
El Jaish	26	13	6	7	45	40	45
Al Gharafa	26	12	4	10	42	43	40
Umm Salal	26	9	10	7	32	35	37
Al Kharaitiyat	26	10	4	12	27	32	34
Al Sailiya	26	8	7	11	32	45	31
Al Arabi	26	8	4	14	39	56	28
Al Ahli	26	7	6	13	33	45	27
Al Khor	26	6	7	13	27	40	25
Shahania (R)[1]	26	3	13	10	30	53	22
Muaither (R)	26	5	5	16	25	48	20
Al Wakrah (R)	26	2	9	15	29	50	15

[1]*Relegated after losing rel/prom play-off*

SAUDI ARABIA

2016-17 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Hilal (C)	26	21	3	2	63	16	66
Al Ahli	26	17	4	5	57	30	55
Al Nassr	26	16	4	6	44	25	52
Al Ittihad[1]	26	17	4	5	57	37	52
Al Raed	26	11	2	13	37	47	35
Al Shabab	26	8	9	9	28	32	33
Al Taawoun	26	9	4	13	33	40	31
Al Fateh	26	7	8	11	33	39	29
Al Faisaly	26	6	10	10	30	41	28
Al Qadisiyah	26	6	10	10	38	38	28
Al Ettifaq	26	7	6	13	31	45	27
Al Batin[2]	26	6	8	12	31	43	26
Al Khaleej (R)	26	5	8	13	32	51	23
Al Wehda (R)	26	5	2	19	35	65	17

[1]*3pts deducted for failing to pay a player*
[2]*Enter rel/prom play-off*

CONCACAF

CONCACAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Final

1st leg

Apr18
Tigres UANL (Mex) 1 (Sosa 32)
Pachuca (Mex) 1 (Lopez 3)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Geiger (USA)
Tigres UANL: Guzman - Rodriguez (Damm 68), Ayala, Juninho, Torres Nilo, Duenas, Pizarro (Advincula 74), Sosa, Vargas (Zelarayan 85), Aquino, Gignac.
Pachuca: Blanco - Lopez, Gonzalez, Murillo, Garcia, Urretaviscaya, Hernandez, Gutierrez (Medina 90+1), Lozano, Guzman, Jara (Aguirre 84).

2nd leg

Apr 26
Pachuca 1 (Jara 83)
Tigres UANL 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Ramos (Mex)
Pachuca 2-1 on agg
Pachuca: Blanco - Lopez, Gonzalez, Murillo, Garcia, Urretaviscaya (Medina 84), Hernandez, Gutierrez, Lozano (Figueroa 90), Guzman (Aguirre 77), Jara.
Tigres UANL: Guzman - Rodriguez (Advincula 46), Ayala, Juninho, Torres Nilo, Damm (Vargas 46), Pizarro, Duenas (Zelarayan 75), Aquino, Sosa, Gignac. *Sent off: Pizarro 79.*

Previous winners

2008-09	Atlante (Mex)
2009-10	Pachuca (Mex)
2010-11	Monterrey (Mex)
2011-12	Monterrey (Mex)
2012-13	Monterrey (Mex)
2013-14	Cruz Azul (Mex)
2014-15	America (Mex)
2015-16	America (Mex)

BAHAMAS

2016-17 – CHAMPIONSHIP GROUP – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
W Warriors (C)	4	3	1	0	9	3	10
IM Bears	4	2	1	1	9	5	7
Dynamos	4	1	3	0	9	5	6
United	4	1	1	2	5	7	4
Lyford Cay	4	0	0	4	2	14	0

DOMINICA

2016-17 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dublanc (C)	17	13	1	3	48	13	40
Harlem Utd	18	12	2	4	52	15	38
Exodus	18	11	2	5	32	19	35
Sagicor SE	17	9	3	5	39	27	30
Nthn Bombers	16	8	1	7	32	23	25
Pointe Michel	17	8	1	8	34	38	25
Bath Estate	16	7	2	7	33	36	23
Middleham	17	5	5	7	25	26	20
Wacky Rlls (R)	16	3	1	12	16	39	10
Kensbro (R)	18	0	0	18	6	81	0

Remaining games of the18-round season not played

OCEANIA

OFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Semi-finals

1st legs - Apr 8; 2nd legs - Apr16
Magenta (NwC) v Team Wellington (NZ)
2-2, 1-7 (agg 3-9)
Tefana (Tah) v Auckland City (NZ)
0-2, 0-2 (agg 0-4)

Final

1st leg

Apr 30
Auckland City 3 (Joao Moreira pen 20, 28, De Vries 89)
Team Wellington 0
HT: 2-0. **Att:** 1,000. **Ref:** Waldron (NZ)
Auckland City: Zubikarai - Berlanga, White, Iwata, Bilen (Tavano 78), Kim, Howieson, Riera, Lewis, Joao Moreira (R Drake 90+2), Tade (De Vries 65).
Team Wellington: Basalaj - Robertson, Gulley, Moretti, Barcia, Villa (Kirwan 78), Jackson, Bevin, Margetts (Hailemariam 82), Stevens, Zambrano (Harris 61).

2nd leg

May 7
Team Wellington 0
Auckland City 2 (De Vries 63, Tade 76)
HT: 0-0. **Att:** 1,000. **Ref:** Hauata (Tah)
Auckland City 5-0 on agg
Team Wellington: Basalaj - Robertson, Gulley, Schrijvers (Moretti 43), Barcia (Kirwan 78), Villa, Jackson, Bevin (Blackburn 88), Margetts, Stevens, Harris.
Auckland City: Zubikarai - Berlanga, White, Iwata, Bilen, Kim (Dordevic 85), Howieson, Riera, Lewis, Joao Moreira (De Vries 40), Tade (Tavano 87).

Previous winners

2007	Waitakere United (NZ)
2007-08	Waitakere United (NZ)
2008-09	Auckland City (NZ)
2009-10	Hekari United (PNG)
2010-11	Auckland City (NZ)
2011-12	Auckland City (NZ)
2012-13	Auckland City (NZ)
2013-14	Auckland City (NZ)
2014-15	Auckland City (NZ)
2016	Auckland City (NZ)

KEY TO TABLES
(C) = champions
(R) = relegated
(Q) = qualified for next stage

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World Soccer's GREAT MATCHES

MAY 14, 2003, ITALY: CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Juventus 3 Real Madrid 1

Juventus overturn a first-leg deficit to restore national pride and set up the first all-Italian Champions League Final

On top (left to right)...Edgar Davids, Alessio Tacchinardi and Alessandro Del Piero

With Juventus trailing 2-1 from the first leg in Spain, Italian football had been under attack ahead of the Champions League semi-final return.

Real Madrid's *Galacticos* were expected to progress, and even though they left Brazilian superstar Ronaldo on the bench they still possessed Raul, Luis Figo and Zinedine Zidane in their ranks.

But first-half goals from Alessandro Del Piero and David Trezeguet stunned the visitors and Juve went into the break with an aggregate lead. In the second-half, Gianluca Zambrotta and Pavel Nedved exploited the areas left vacant by Roberto Carlos' forays upfield and the outstanding Nedved added a third to extend the aggregate score to 4-2 before Zidane scored a late consolation.

As *World Soccer* reported: "Against the background of such fierce criticism, Juve's 3-1 second-leg defeat of Real Madrid was seen not just as one in the eye for the Spaniards but also as a definitive vindication for an Italian football movement that has suffered its share of disappointments in recent times."

The report went on: "Even Juve's normally elegant coach Marcello Lippi got in on the act of vindication, saying: 'We've proved that Italian football did not deserve all the negative judgments aimed at it but that it deserves respect.'"

And Italian daily newspaper *Gazzetta dello Sport* couldn't resist their own dig either, adding: "The Spaniards have been jeering us for months...as if some latter-day Moses had handed down to them the Tablets regarding football.

"Now we see them struggle off the pitch on their knees, still reeling from the tough lesson handed out to them."

Juventus went on to play Milan in an all-Italian Final but were beaten 3-2 on penalties after a goalless draw. WS

Out...Pavel Nedved's yellow card meant he missed the Final

Referee: Meier (Swi)

KEY MOMENTS

Opener...David Trezeguet scores for Juve

11min Alessandro Del Piero sets up David Trezeguet, who scores from the edge of the six-yard box. **1-0**

20min Raul wastes a golden opportunity to equalise when he shoots straight at Gianluigi Buffon from eight yards after beating the offside trap.

35min Del Piero beats Fernando Hierro to put Trezeguet through on goal, but he snatches his shot and Iker Casillas saves, with Michel Salgado mopping up the danger.

42min Del Piero controls the ball superbly in the penalty area, beats two defenders and shoots low into the corner of the net. **2-0**

66min Real sub Ronaldo is brought down in the area by Paolo Montero, but Buffon saves Luis Figo's tame penalty.

Two...Alessandro Del Piero

72min Gianluca Zambrotta's long pass finds Pavel Nedved, who outpaces two defenders and beats Casillas. **3-0**

81min Nedved is booked for a foul and will miss the Final.

88min Zinedine Zidane controls a long ball, beats Montero and fires a low shot past Buffon. **3-1**

Spot-kick...Gianluigi Buffon denies Luis Figo

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